"Snufkin screwed his eyes tight shut, pursing his lips. It was the honest truth. He may have only just been scraping what could be called middle-age, but things had been even less consistent than usual as of late, and he’d chalked it up to that and nothing more, for how could it be?

'I'm not sure that I like what you’re implying.'

It's already halfway into November, and Snufkin can't seem to tear himself away from Moominvalley."
It wasn’t hard to spot the beast lazing in the fork of what was once an apple tree, now that its leaves had shed for the season. Anyone would be forgiven for thinking an old scarecrow had been swept away by the autumn winds and caught in one of its branches; they wore a tattered grey coat that may have once been blue, but had long-since bleached in the sun. A hat of matching colour adorned with several haphazardly placed flowers was sitting lopsided on their face, flattening their fading red hair, which curled around their cheeks and ran down their nose.

At the base of the tree was a person dressed in similarly crumpled clothing, though slightly more-well groomed, which wasn’t saying much. Aside from the forest-green patchwork dress and a goose feather in lieu of the flowercrown, the only real differences between them were his round brown eyes and shorter stature.

He knocked on the bark as if entering a house, which it sort of was. 'Hullo', he called up to its occupant.

The scarecrow lazily lifted his hat and peered down; a delighted smile crept across his face. 'Snufkin'.

He descended from the tree bit by bit, not quite so nimble these days. Snufkin took his paw and kindly helped his father down the thicker section of the trunk.

The Joxter, as he was called, slowly opened his arms and brought them around his son, loosely running a paw down his back and keeping it there. His father moved not unlike a sloth, when he wanted to move at all, and he said in his drawling voice, 'Lovely to see you. On your way out, eh'?

Snufkin absently scratched the coarse hair of his nose; his winter coat was coming in. 'That’s actually what I’m here to talk to you about'.

He flopped down heavily in the grass and rubbed at the corners of his mouth. 'I have the strangest feeling I shouldn’t go this year'. Which just wasn’t right for him; he always departed Moominvalley as soon as its days grew shorter. Only his first visit here and a few freak blizzards over the years had prevented him from doing so. “I’m not at all sure what’s brought it on – just, this nagging sense of- of a sort of bad thing, if I did go.”

'Forebodings'? whispered Joxter, ominously.

Snufkin smacked his lips. 'Suppose so. I’ve never had them before'.

He hummed in thought, tapping his fingers to his mouth. The Joxter couldn’t recall having any himself recently, so it couldn’t be a change in the weather or some great disaster. He was usually an excellent judge of such things – a seer, they’d started to call him in his age, a title that Joxter simply loved to flaunt when anyone would question him.

'A reading from the cards, perhaps'? he suggested.

'I think you might be right', said Snufkin. He stood and brushed the dead leaves from his trousers. 'My tent is still up. We’ll do it there'.
The Joxter had suggested he consult them for him, as Snufkin - superstitious though he was - could also be the stubborn sort, easily swayed by his own decisions once he’d settled on them, and would probably find any excuse to interpret whatever suited him.

‘What do you want to know?’ he asked, removing the cards from Snufkin’s bag. Two old decks tied with a thin yellow ribbon. The few belongings he owned had already been packed away before he’d decided against it.

Snufkin thought about the sort of answer he was after. ‘What’s preventing me from leaving Moominvalley’.

He rolled out Snufkin’s own mat, and they knelt opposite one another.

Eight times he shuffled the first deck, eight again for the second. Snufkin repeated the process and handed them back. He split them into four separate piles face down on the mat, placing one above the other three. Joxter plucked a card from it: "The Empress."

The Joxter raised his eyebrows, 'Interesting'. An archetype associated with creation and renewal, generally. 'Perhaps you should be considering a new journey; a change to your usual routine'.

Snufkin seemed satisfied enough with that, though there were still three remaining cards.

He turned over his second selection, the first of the bottom deck, and a troubling one indeed: "The Tower". Never really a good sign, as it predicted sudden upheaval - though occasionally a necessary one.

'Not reversed', noted Snufkin, surprisingly optimistic.

'Not reversed, no', said Joxter, in a hopeful tone. 'Still'.

'It could be the bad feeling'. Snufkin remarked, quietly. ‘I still don’t know what, though'.

'A new experience, but take heed. A dangerous trip, I’d say’. he thought out loud. His father had already moved onto the third card, turning it over to reveal "Ace of Cups".

His paw faltered a little above it. Now aces signified true, raw emotion, something positive. Instinctual. The Joxter glanced back at the initial card; something else. There was a burning question at the back of his mind, and if it was in Snufkin’s too, then he certainly wasn’t showing it. He didn’t say anything just yet.

'New beginnings twice over, eh', mumbled Joxter, biting his lip. He crossed his long legs over one another and took a deep sigh. 'Must be quite the reason'.

Snufkin simply hummed in response, frowning.

The Joxter tentatively reached for the fourth and final card. Snufkin was tapping the side of his shoe, anxiously. It came up reversed this time; ‘Eight of Wands’, it was, a symbol of travel, freedom, something he expected Snufkin would turn up quite often in his own readings. But of course, in this position—
'Delays', said Snufkin, grimly, finishing his thought.

His father scanned over the selection of cards in front of them. “Indeed.” He smoothed down the hair on his cheek a bit absently. “Seems to me you were right about not heading South.”

Snufkin nodded to the spread. “What do you make of that?”

Joxter rocked on his crossed legs and placed his tongue in his cheek. How was one to start these things.

'I've a good idea'. he said slowly.

Snufkin couldn’t place his tone, and it was enough to set him on edge. This wasn’t unusual. His father could be very difficult to read when he wanted to be - not unlike himself, he supposed. It wasn’t quite so fun to be on the receiving end.

The Joxter leaned in; there was a serious look in his yellow eyes. That was unusual.

'You and Moomin’s lad', he began, looking uncharacteristically bashful. 'You’ve haven’t been – I suppose, "courting"'?

At first, Snufkin only stared at him blankly, because it was no secret that he and Moomintroll were a pair and it hadn’t been for many years - and when the penny did drop, a hot rush of embarrassment washed over his body. They were both rather old-fashioned mumriks when it came to certain matters, which made his father’s questioning all the more disconcerting.

No, ‘courting’, as it were, was something that neither he nor Moomintroll craved from one another. Close as they were, the two were content to share affection in other ways.

But there had been a day - not so long before the end of summer, in fact - one of the handful of times, and they’d lain in the grass by Snufkin’s tent, deep enough away that no one should come to disturb them, thinking of nothing in that moment but each other.

Snufkin chanced a glance from under his hat. 'I don’t follow', he said curtly, but his tail was flicking.

His father folded his arms and gave him a withered look. 'I think you do'. He tried a more sympathetic approach. 'Have you been out of sorts lately'?

'No', answered Snufkin. His tail was no longer moving, and even so, he had no reason to lie about that.

'Tell me then', The Joxter hunched over slightly, his voice was much lower now, 'and be nothing but honest; how long has it been, since ...'

He gestured loosely and made a similarly vague noise. Neither were willing to put anything into words, but graciously there was a mutual understanding between them. Snufkin realised that he didn’t intend to let this go.

It was a long pause for such a short, simple answer. 'Four'.

'Weeks'?
The Joxter had his mouth open in disbelief.

Was it really so foolish of him to have not made a fuss until now? It wasn’t as if he’d had any of the same experiences as Snufkin, he couldn’t know what it was like.

‘On the change, is all’, he muttered, unable to meet eyes with his father and hoping that his wording was enough to avoid an explanation. ‘Have been for some time’.

But he wasn’t convinced. ‘That’s what you think, is it’?

Snufkin screwed his eyes tight shut, pursing his lips. It was the honest truth. He may have only just been scraping what could be called middle-age, but things had been even less consistent than usual as of late, and he’d chalked it up to that and nothing more, for how could it be?

‘I’m not sure that I like what you’re implying’.

‘Bit young, aren’t you’? he challenged, firmly, though Snufkin could see his father’s whiskers twitching at the subject. ‘Your mother was long in her fifties before she had hers – and her mother, too, I believe’.

‘Well!’ cried Snufkin. He stood and threw up his arms, allowing them to drop limply by his side. ‘There isn’t any reason I should be the same. I’m not a Mymble’!

He’d expected Joxter to flounce away from his outburst, or raise his voice above his, and he would have understood it, too. But instead, his father reached across the mat and pulled him in, and Snufkin allowed himself to be hugged.

‘I know, son’.

Despite it all, Snufkin appreciated that; perhaps selfishly, he found himself wishing that he’d been there to speak to him that way from the start. He closed his eyes and let out a strained breath. The tips of his paws were numb with tension, grounding him when he wanted nothing more than to flee.

There were soothing motions running down the fabric against his spine, and there might have been words, too, but Snufkin couldn’t hear them right now.

When his breathing slowed, The Joxter pulled away. “We should really pay her a visit, you know. I don’t understand these matters myself.” He gently pushed back his son’s hat to better see his face. ‘She could give you a clearer answer, I imagine’.

Snufkin was in two minds about the proposal: if he didn’t visit his mother, then that meant nothing would actually happen and he could forget all about their conversation. He could go on not thinking about it and there would be no change, and if there was, well – he would cross that bridge when he came to it.

If he did visit, then everything would become so horribly real.

He made his choice, and Joxter reached around to stroke his hair.
'Good lad. Come on, I saw her pass by not long ago'.

Chapter End Notes

well then
It had taken them a good hour to catch up with the travelling turtle on which The Mymble had placed her house. His father walked at a snail’s pace, though that was more down to preference than age. It made it far too easy to think about things, so Snufkin started counting how many mushrooms grew along the path instead. The first one he spotted was a sizeable white puffball; he decided that didn’t count and to forget about it, and tried again when he approached a new one.

\textit{One . . . two, three . . . four -- how could I have been this blind.} Realising he didn't want to think about numbers much, either, he reached into his dress to take out his mouth organ - which was in his bag back at his tent. Snufkin scuffed a rock with his shoe and trudged miserably after his father.

The Joxter had gone on ahead once it was within sight. Snufkin simply couldn’t find the strength to broach the subject, and he’d been tactful enough to agree that his son had experienced enough stress for the day, which would have calmed him somewhat had he not then finished the thought with, 'all things considered.' He was now lying in a dirt bed, looking about as mournful as its wilting flowers, waiting for the inevitable.

He’d been distractedly deadheading some fading snapdragons for a minute or so, when his mother came rushing down the porch steps without so much as a greeting. She and Joxter had to all but frogmarch Snufkin into the house, quietly passing a room full of Mymbleteens, who were too engrossed in their own matters to care about another visitor.

\textbf{-}

In the end, a few minutes were all that was needed. It had all been done within the guest bathroom, to give them privacy from the dozen other residents of the house, and it was where Snufkin was still sitting – alone, desperately brushing the worn felt of his hat over and over, for if he didn’t he may just start to scream. His parents had gone for tea in the kitchen, no doubt to discuss their impending grandparenthood. It carried through the thin wooden walls, muffled by the threadbare carpeting along the hall, and there were a few instances where the intelligible sound became his name.

Mymble had confirmed it. The absence of any usual signs which had lulled Snufkin into his safe little bubble didn’t seem to faze her. She’d seen it so often; of course there was no oddity that could take her by surprise. The memory was already clouding over by now, but Snufkin could recall gentle platitudes of how this was ‘easily done’ and how he was a ‘lucky-so-and-so’ for not dealing the worst.

He didn’t think he was.

Snufkin pressed his face against the cold of the wall tiles. His mother had tried to admonish him for acting so careless to begin with when he dared to complain, until she caught the despondent look on his face.

"A little small, yes," she’d said at one point, pressing her fingers all around him with much less
care than he’d anticipated. "But your estimate’s about right, I’d say."

Snufkin had hurriedly pulled his dress back over him as soon as he was allowed, far too aware of how snug it suddenly felt compared to that same morning. He couldn’t act like he hadn’t been aware of some sort of change, but Snufkin had always carried a bit of weight to him – plus, it was around this time of year when Moomintroll’s mother would start to add more-than-generous portions to his plate, always in the weeks leading up to his departure, and he’d pretend not to notice.

After some time – it could have been anywhere from a few minutes to an hour – Snufkin cautiously pulled open the bathroom door and stepped into the hallway. There were no longer any gossiping voices floating along from the furthest room, just the hissing of an old kettle, and as he crept closer, the crackling of logs from the stove.

His mother was busy chopping up leeks and nuts beside it, mopping her brow with the sleeve of her blouse in the heat. His father was already at the table, reclining dangerously far back in an uneven wooden chair, with his faded old hat over his eyes.

The Mymble stopped and turned at the sound of Snufkin’s heels hitting the stone floor, and she smiled. “Good to have you back with us, darling. You’ll be staying for lunch, won’t you? The children will be joining us, of course.”

Snufkin hesitated. ‘No’ was absolutely the first word on his mind, but he was sure this was more of a closed question, and he was in too much of a fog to even think of what to do next, anyway. He didn’t fancy the idea of sharing the table with his many siblings, but the final bunch had grown considerably since he last visited and probably weren’t as rambunctious as before, and their presence would at least mean some respite from any awkward questions. For once in his life he felt glad to have some direction, so he agreed.

He picked a seat beside The Joxter, who raised the brim of his hat - along with his eyebrows - nodding questioningly.

‘I’m fine’, Snufkin answered quietly.

His father nodded again and adjusted his hat back to position, lazily patting his arm.

‘Won’t be long, boys’, announced Mymble, setting out the plates in front of them on top of the floral tablecloth. She wagged a finger at him. 'And I want to see yours cleared. I can’t imagine you’ve had enough proper meals down you'.

‘I’ve eaten with Moomintroll’s family’, Snufkin replied, a little defensively, because part of him knew it was true. He barely had enough to keep himself going when he didn’t join them.

‘Ye-es, but not every day, though. Poor little thing must be half-starved’, she cooed, sympathetically. His face flushed an awful pink against his orange hair at her gushing – and to make matters worse, she then leant over and ran a thumb over Snufkin’s middle. ‘I wouldn’t worry, though. You wouldn’t still be growing if there was anything wrong’.

She patted him softly for emphasis. If she hadn’t been his mother and he a guest in her house, her paw would have been struck away in an instant. He barely held back a grimace.

Mymble was none the wiser. 'Are you feeling alright, dear? You look unwell'.

To his relief, his siblings slowly started filing into the kitchen, coming from every which way and
chatting amongst one another, lured no doubt by the smell of fresh cooking. His mother immediately brought her arms to her hips and returned to the chopping board.

One of them pointed out Snufkin next to their father, and he was soon swarmed by a mixed pack of Mymbles and Joxters and who-knows-what of various shapes and sizes, all trying to catch up on the past few years of absence at once:

'Isn’t that Snufkin!'

'He’s gone all Joxter all over, hasn’t he’?

'Why aren’t you away by now’?

'Did you stop to visit us’?

'Oooh, did you miss us’?

'Have you brought your instruments? We should play after lunch'.

'Is Moomintroll with you’?

'Aren’t those mother’s old curtains on your dress’ hem’?

'Children', warned Mymble, suddenly, not looking up from her cooking. 'Give your brother some space. There will be plenty of time to talk when the food is ready'.

Each child eagerly rushed to their preferred places. The terrible squeaking of a dozen worn down chair legs rubbing against the floor had him reaching up to touch his hat again. Snufkin wondered if there had ever been a point where he’d been part of this routine. He’d have sent himself down the river in a basket if he’d had to be.

Hard to believe that it had been under the watch of the same doting matriarch, who was currently slaving over a pot of hot food on the eve of winter, making sure every single child was fed, clothed, and warm. Maybe that wasn’t fair. After all, with all that responsibility, something had to give – it just happened to be him. He might learn to truly let go, someday.

A loaf of bread was being passed along the table as his mother dished out their servings. She came to a stop where Snufkin and his father were seated, narrowing her sharp eyes at their hats: “Off,” she commanded, brandishing the spoon as if bewitching them to do so.

They both reluctantly obeyed and rested them in their laps. A wave of choked giggles broke out across the children at their telling-off, and no one thought anything strange about the top of Snufkin’s head, as many of the others had inherited the same growths.

There wasn’t much more they wanted to talk about, it turned out. The novelty of Snufkin’s arrival soon wore off, as it would in a house with so many people, and the conversation around the table turned to other things: one sibling had joined a band, he learnt, the one who’d piped up about instruments earlier; the tallest of the group, a spindly, wilting Mymble. Snufkin believed her name was Teasel, though he didn’t know why. Possible she’d picked it herself.

There were a few other named children, too: Alfalfa, Henry, and Gabriel, but they were all Joxters. They didn’t seem to be bound by tradition, which figured. Apparently, all three were studying to be woodsmen. At least for the time being. If they were anything like their father then they wouldn't be the type to keep steady jobs.
Much of the talking died down once everyone had fully tucked into their food. The Joxter picked up on Snufkin being the only one to finish up his cauliflower, and had discreetly scraped his own share onto his plate. He was silently grateful. Mymble had caught them at it, but she only winked approvingly.

Snufkin reached to pull down his brim only to grasp thin air.

---

After lunch, Snufkin was feeling rather more sociable than he had been. He’d subtly lowered his trousers below his waist and prayed that no-one would notice. He was probably going to have to find a solution to that at some point, but not now. There wasn’t really much need to worry, as everyone save for his parents had gone away again, up to their rooms or outdoors to play in the new snow.

The house was pleasantly quiet again. It should have made him more at ease, but Snufkin knew it was only a matter of time before that matter would rear its head.

'So’, began The Joxter, bringing his paws into his lap with a loud clap. 'When do you think we’ll be expecting this one’? And there it was.

His mother had a puzzled look on her face, which he didn’t like one bit. ‘Really, it all depends on the baby itself.’

It was the first time anyone had said it, and Snufkin felt his mouth watering with the sickening fear it sent through him, the only time in all these weeks he thought he might very nearly be ill. His heart was drumming in his ears; an anxious flutter started up somewhere in his stomach. He tried to breathe through his panic.

'Mymbles: now they’re about three months', she continued, in blissful ignorance of the bombshell she’d dropped. 'I’ve had a fair few litters take after me, and they’re out like that – but considering how you’re already four months gone, I imagine that’s not the case'.

The word ‘litters’ stuck in Snufkin’s head like thick molasses. He ran a paw over his face as if to scrub it from his thoughts. Moomintroll had no littermates, and neither did he, as it happened. He wasn’t even sure Moomins could have more than one. He wasn’t sure of a lot of things. Either way, there was nothing to worry about, nothing at all.

'No, for you I’d say another four, perhaps a week or two longer, certainly no more'. Mymble leant over and patted his arm, as if this was any sort of consolation.

Snufkin quickly counted through the time in his head; that’d be late March, possibly April. That probably meant venturing to the South was right out, as his father had predicted. It was going to be a very long winter indeed.

'How can you be certain’? asked Snufkin, uneasily. His mother remained so frustratingly collected in the face of what he considered to be an unfathomably daunting situation, even whilst shaking her head.

'Guesswork', she admitted. 'I’ve never met a mumrik who mated a moomin. Oh!’ Then she guffawed and elbowed Joxter, who joined in with her and slapped a paw across his knee, like it was
all a merry little joke to them.

Snufkin couldn’t see the funny side. 'Have you been at the gin already'?

'Snufkin, now don’t be so glum', reassured Mymble. 'Do you really think Moomintroll is going to mind’?

That was where his blood began to boil. 'Why should Moomintroll be the only one who matters’? His paw came down on the table, hard, and it fell silent. Not once had anyone thought to ask his own feelings, just how wonderful it will be and what the others might say. It would be so easy for them.

His parents were looking at him with a mix of shock and shame.

Snufkin straightened out the cloth that he’d gripped under his claws. 'Sorry'.

'Quite alright', Mymble said, lightly. 'It’s to be expected'.

'He’s always like that'.

Snufkin’s head swivelled around in time to see Little My, who’d been suspiciously absent from lunch, crawling out of a crockpot by the stove, and was hit by the stark realisation that she’d heard every word of it. That was already three people too many.

'What news'! she cried, devilishly, leaping up in front of him and cackling like a dolphin. His hellion of a half-sister went around the table, gathering up as many leftovers as she could in her greedy little paws. 'But yes, whatever will Moomintroll think, I wonder'.

Snufkin had a dark look in his eyes. 'Don’t you say a thing to him'.

He was, of course, completely ignored. Little My had made to spring from the table’s edge when Snufkin’s paw shot out in front of her.

'Please'.

He’d flinched - but the usual flashing of teeth and claws for the people who crossed her never came.

Maybe it was the sight of the raw, red rings around his eyes (perhaps she was finally developing a sense of empathy in her mature years), or the fact that he of all people had even tried to stop her, but Little My only stared at him, an expression on her face that he’d never seen there before.

'Go and tell him yourself, you sorry old oaf', she said. 'It’ll be funny to watch you bluster about, anyway', which in Little My was an apology of sorts. Then she scuttled off with her loot in the direction of the lounge.

Snufkin sank back into his chair and rubbed a palm against his forehead exhaustedly. Yes, he really ought to.

Chapter End Notes

(drops my personal headcanons in the anonymous fic) delightfully devilish, seymour
wasn't mymble's house on a sea turtle in moominvalley? ah who cares. she has a land turtle home now.
Snufkin lowered his hat against the blinding sun and shivered. There might have been a strong light outside but my, was it ever frigid. The damp spot across his sleeve was practically frosting over. He tucked his paws tight inside them and brought his arms under his chin, resting on top of his knees. He’d travelled out a bit from his mother’s house to a hill overlooking the entire valley, where he’d gone to think about this, that, and the other. It was quite beautiful in the winter-time, he hadn’t seen it this way for a good few years. He might as well try to find the best in it; there wasn't going to be much else to look at for a while.

Someone’s sluggish footsteps creaked along the heavy snow. Snufkin must have stayed past the time he said he’d needed away, because his father was climbing the ridge toward him, wearing a troubled expression. He'd changed into a thicker, woollen scarf and gloves, with a sturdier red hat, and was holding something small. The Joxter removed his hat with his free paw and dusted a few flakes from it against his leg, before lowering himself down close to Snufkin.

'You should really come inside now'.

His petulant grumble of “m'not cold” was met with a pained huff, but he didn’t really care much.

Joxter pressed the object - which was an old, dog-eared paperback - into his paw. 'Here, your mother wants you to borrow this. It's all she has, I'm afraid'.

Snufkin wrinkled his nose. The wording on the cover was less than favourable, but he flipped through it anyway, only to encounter more of the same inside. It was full of saccharine illustrations showing delighted people and their experiences, and didn’t it all look such a grand time. There were faded pencil scribblings in some of the margins in what he recognised to be Mymble’s handwriting. Not wanting to appear ungracious, he pocketed it and muttered his thanks.

His father, meanwhile, dug into his coat for his pipe and matches. He got as far as raising the end to his lips before catching Snufkin’s eye and sheepishly stuffing them both away again. 'Suppose I shouldn’t, eh’?

Snufkin shrugged. 'I have'.

The Joxter opened his mouth to say something, but must have thought better of it, instead coming to rest a heavy arm across his son’s neck.

'You shouldn’t be upset about this', he soothed.

'Oh, well. Consider it solved'.
'I know it must be overwhelming', began Joxter, stroking down his shoulder. 'But is it really all that bad? You’ve been a parent before, I’m told'. Which wasn’t really the issue, but Snufkin knew he was trying, even if he wasn't in a very agreeable mood right now.

He’d never actually met the woodies himself, but Snufkin spoke of them plenty. They’d all been packed off to Emma’s school and into her niece's care by the end of that strange summer, and one or two had passed by the valley over the years, but never whenever his father was around. They always seemed to miss each other.

Snufkin wouldn’t have exactly called himself a true parent to them. Not that he wasn't very fond of them, but he’d have been around – oh, fifteen or so at the time. He’d made certain to keep in touch; twenty-four individual letters would go out each year, still into their adulthood, and he’d take visits to the theatre on rare occasions - but apart from that, he’d never been a mainstay in their lives. They got along perfectly well without him.

'Hardly. They raised themselves, much like I did'. Snufkin immediately winced. He hadn’t wanted it to come out quite so bitterly. 'I didn’t mean that'.

His father sighed and stilled his paw. “No, that’s quite alright.” But even so, Snufkin relaxed into his touch, to show there were no hard feelings.

Joxter then attempted to change the subject, to one that caused him even more discomfort: 'When are you going to tell Moomintroll'?

'I don’t know', he said, irritably. He hadn’t wanted to think about it. 'He’ll be deep into hibernation by now, I’m sure of it'.

'Can’t you go and wake him'?

Snufkin worried the side of his lip. 'I don’t want to bother him'. Which was a weak excuse, really. This was certainly one of those exceptional circumstances that people tended to accept regardless of their plans.

'Oh, now, I’m sure he’d be more than understanding if you told him about this'. Joxter said, encouragingly. 'He’s a good man, is Moomin’s boy, and he’s been known to stay awake some winters anyway, so you wouldn't-- Snufkin'.

He felt the fingers around his shoulder tighten, and Snufkin turned to see his father staring dead ahead into the open. There was that blown look in his eyes that he usually got whenever a bug or bird had caught his interest.

'I see him'.

Snufkin jumped to his feet immediately, eyes darting across all the blinding white. He couldn’t have done. 'Where'? His voice was suddenly very hoarse.

“There, down there, in those woods!”

Snufkin squinted down between the trees just below the drop. Sure enough, camouflaged amongst the snow-dusted landscape was a tiny Moomintroll in the distance, gathering up fallen pine-needles from the forest floor.

“You said yourself not a minute ago that he’d be hibernating, and there he is. Don’t you see! It’s a sign,” The Joxter clapped him on the back, cheerily. “You must go and talk to him.”
'I can’t', replied Snufkin, quickly. He was shaking again. 'Pappa, I can’t do it'. Moomintroll wasn’t meant to be here. None of this was meant to be happening. None of it was. He was already several miles South, it was nothing more than a delirious dream brought on by some winter lurgy; soon he’d wake up and laugh it off as strange symbolism or a bad catch and forget about it by the afternoon.

But it was all too clear: the wet of the snow melting on his face, his father’s anxious voice in his ear. 'And then what? You miss your chance, and when he wakes, it’s March already’?

Snufkin wanted to argue, but he couldn’t find the words. Before he had even a second to even think any further, The Joxter was suddenly yelping and hollering, leaping up and down like a fool, waving his red hat as a beacon with the energy of a man half his age.

Snufkin clutched at his arm in an effort to calm him. 'What in gods' name are you doing?’ he hissed, despite Moomintroll being a good half-mile from their spot.

'Like a plaster, my boy,' he said, “the quicker it’s out of the way, the sooner the pain will stop', and continued his performance.

To Snufkin’s horror, Moomintroll frantically glanced around at the noise. He hadn’t yet noticed where it was coming from. He begged his father to stop and let it be; a true sign would mean he’d have seen them by now.

Joxter ignored him. 'Moomintroll! Up here! Over here, lad! It’s Snufkin and I'! He swiped the hat from Snufkin’s head and added it to the display, whirling them up in the air like flags.

He dared to look back in his direction, and all in an instant their eyes met across the gap. There was a distant shout, too far to make out the word, but Snufkin had an idea what it was. And then suddenly he was dashing towards the hilltop.

Snufkin felt his legs weaken underneath him, as though the weight of it all was dragging them down. He stumbled back slightly and wrung his paws in front of his face.

His father caught hold of him, gently guiding him back to the ground. 'Easy, it’s all right'. There was nothing more he could do now except to let it happen.

'Snufkin'!

All too quickly, Moomintroll came racing up from behind them, leaving a small trail of pine-needles that were spilling from his grip in his path. He abandoned the rest a short distance away, and Snufkin barely had a moment to register anything before being swept into fierce embrace, up off the ground, twirled like he was lighter than air, Moomintroll hopping from foot to foot in an almost celebratory jig.

Snufkin cast a bashful look at his father, who pretended to be deeply invested in the scenery.

'I don’t believe it'! There were paws were all about him, testing that he was really there. 'I didn’t think I’d see you again this year'.
Snufkin took them from where they’d rested unthinkingly on his waist and squeezed, just a touch too hard. 'Neither did I. I thought you’d be asleep.'

Moomintroll frowned a little at the pressure, but didn't stop smiling. 'Funny thing; we were meant to have been, but we're staying up a day more for Pappa. No, no, there's nothing wrong', he clarified, noticing the concern in Snufkin's eyes. 'No, we just wanted to put together a little something nice. I don't know if you've heard. They were saying on the wireless that some areas now, on the second Sunday-- oh, anyway, all of that's irrelevant'.

Moomintroll waved flippantly and grinned. “What are you still doing here? I thought you’d gone to pack up the other day'.

'No'. He exhaled sharply. Snufkin had been threatening to leave since the October, though whenever Moomintroll had asked him exactly when, he’d brushed it aside with an indifferent, "who knows; could be a week from now, could be right this very moment,” but it never was, and the next thing he knew, it was November.

'In fact, I’m not going at all'.

Moomintroll made an almost comically exaggerated take and gaped at him.

'But you always go – not that I want you to, of course', he added, hastily, and that much was known. Whatever was to happen now, Snufkin felt secure in the knowledge that Moomintroll would be thrilled to keep him around all through winter, reasons being aside. 'What’s changed your mind'?

He turned helplessly to The Joxter, who was rocking on the balls of his feet with his arms behind his back, simply watching. Waiting.

Like a plaster, he’d said. One sudden move and it would be over. Or beginning. Snufkin swallowed thickly and readied himself.

'Moomintroll, I’m expecting'.

There was an appropriate enough pause. His words seemed to hang in the air around them, with Snufkin wanting to pull it all back to him before anyone could catch it.

Moomintroll looked at him, unblinking, unnervingly so; he turned to his father, who was doing much of the same. Snufkin glanced between them, hoping someone, anyone, would at least show some reaction. If they stayed vacant long enough, he may just be able to escape into the woods without their noticing and never return.

'Yes'? prompted Moomintroll.

'Yes what'? asked Snufkin, weakly. Surely he didn’t already know? Had he caught on much earlier than he himself had, and left Snufkin to put together the pieces on his own?

'Expecting what? Are we in for poor weather again, is that why you haven’t left'?

Oh, for heaven’s sake. Snufkin wasn’t sure his nerves could take much more; the response had knocked the wind from him, and his paws trembled as hard as the last leaves in the branches. He should’ve known that Moomintroll wouldn’t be so perceptive. He loved that darling troll more than anything in the world but by the Booble was he dim.

The awkward silence was swiftly interrupted by The Joxter clearing his throat, causing both of
them to start and turn to him. He stepped into their space and bowed slightly to Snufkin - a way of
saying, "I'll take it from here".

'Forgive me', his father tipped his hat politely.

'Snufkin is telling you that he’s expecting a baby'.

Chapter End Notes

can you Believe that Finland celebrates Father's Day on the second Sunday of
November? which can occur as late as the 14th, so mid-November? which it Was in
1971? and that if I hadn't kept this vaguely mid-century, would be where this falls on
this fic's timeline?
I swear I didn't beforehand.

anyway fun facts.

(we're just gonna ignore that they're already aware of what father's day is in
moominvalley in november alright ghfj. this is what I get for skim reading.)
He hadn’t predicted laughter.

Of all the things a person might do upon receiving this news, a dismissive chuckle and a fond eye-roll wasn’t something Snufkin saw coming – until it suddenly dawned on him, when Moomintroll was still looking at him quizzically, that he’d heard it as a joke. It probably hadn’t helped coming from a person with such a name and reputation.

But The Joxter hadn’t been joking, and Snufkin wasn’t smiling. In fact, he felt about ready to start breaking down into sobs if it went on a moment longer, when at last, mercifully, something finally clicked into place behind Moomintroll’s eyes.

'Are you really?'

Snufkin nodded slowly at first, then a little faster.

He heard a sharp intake of breath hitch in his chest; a tremor started in the paws pressed to his mouth, which then anxiously grasped his shoulders.

Snufkin forced himself to look at Moomintroll’s face, and when he did, immediately wondered why there'd ever been a trace of doubt to begin with. Staring up at the same fear that had been in his reflection in the bathroom mirror, but with complete and utter acceptance, he gathered the strength for the first time in days to raise a smile.

Everything that followed after was much of a haze of warmth and white: "I’ll be off then," he’d heard his father say, the grin his voice evident. "Oh, and I almost forgot – my congratulations." A paw moved away to wave farewell and found its way to his side, so nervously, delicately. Moomintroll’s words reverberated around his head clearer than anything else: 'Snuffi,' there was the touch of a velvet nose against his; 'my dear Snufkin, I-I didn't--' and he squeezed him tight; 'you wonderful man,' because that was how Moomintroll was – he would always know just what to say, and finally, 'I love you.'

Maybe it was silly to still think so, but the ease with which they could tell one another had never ceased to astound him. It might not be said as much as it was between others, but they never needed it to be. The days and months and years it stayed unspoken reminded him how he was lucky, terribly lucky, that someone could love him back.

Snufkin felt the arms around him start to shake slightly. He clumsily reached for Moomintroll’s ear and brushed it between his thumb and forefinger, as he often did to console him.

'Are you crying?'

'No,' he huffed. 'Maybe a little.'
They had the slow walk back into the valley to talk of everything that had happened. It was no longer snowing, but it lay thick on the ground, making the journey just as long as it had been with The Joxter.

Moomintroll, naturally, was full of questions: "how long had he known?", "was everything all right?", and, most importantly to him, "how are you feeling?"

"Only since the morning", "yes", and a hesitant "good, I think - uncertain" had been Snufkin's answers.

Moomintroll didn't judge, he just took his paws comfortingly. 'It's been a long day, hasn't it?' Though he himself practically vibrated with excitement as the distinctive shape of the house soon loomed over the horizon. He'd been understandably shocked after putting together exactly how long ago things had occurred, and had berated himself guiltily not realising sooner. Snufkin assuaged his worries by mentioning that if he of all people hadn't noticed, he couldn't expect Moomintroll to.

'I can't even begin to think of how we're going to tell Mamma and Pappa- ah, or - I guess I'm Moominpappa now, aren't I?' he corrected, suddenly appearing quite dazed; he nudged Snufkin affectionately. 'That would make you Snufkinpappa.'

Moomintroll heard the crunching stop dead behind him, laughing apologetically when he spun around and was met with a very alarmed expression. 'Although, that's really more our tradition. Plain old 'Snufkin' will do.'

It was Snufkin who had managed to speak first, to Moomintroll's surprise. Perhaps it was his encouraging presence beside him, or the sincere way his parents always waited until he was ready, never rushing him, that made it so when they'd both shown their surprise and delight at Snufkin standing in the doorway, everything was shared so naturally.

Moominmamma (or was she Farmor now, he thought) lit up immediately and clutched the fabric of her apron, then flung her arms around them both in a tight embrace. She didn't bother to hide her crying as her son had done, but instead wept about how proud and thrilled she felt for them. As she pulled away, her fingers trailed from Snufkin's back to cup his face, and he smiled bashfully.

Moominpappa had attempted to remain somewhat stoic in the face of it all, giving a joyous shout and an awkward clap as he always did upon hearing good news, but at one point had to excuse himself from the room in a very unconvincing tone - it was the subject of new names that finally tipped him over. When he returned some minutes later, there was a distinct wetness under his eyes.

They both sat quietly for a while longer, soaking in the new information, only breaking the silence with infectious and mirthful giggles when one caught the other's eye, unable to say or do much else - until Moominpappa suddenly blew out an exuberant sigh.

'Well then,' he began, coughing a little when his voice wouldn't cooperate. 'That's certainly been an eventful first celebration. To think they start a day to appreciate fathers, only to learn that your son is about to be, and you're one above it.'

Snufkin looked up in confusion until his gaze landed on Moomintroll, who was beaming at him. 'That's what I was telling you about earlier.'

'Oh, I see.' He briefly wondered what it might be like next year (probably the furthest he'd ever
considered anything), and if they'd be awake for it again, when Moominmamma's voice interrupted his thoughts.

'I don't think any of us will be able to do much sleeping tonight, will we?' She chuckled, moving toward the kitchen. 'I'll get started on supper instead.'

Moomintroll slapped a paw against his snout. 'The pine-needles! I've forgotten them on the hill,' he said, sadly.

'It's no matter,' Moominmamma called out in her encouraging manner. 'I'm sure I can work some magic with what's left over, don't you worry, now. Could you come and help, dear?'

Moomintroll obediently trotted on over - Snufkin, too - though it hadn't really been expected of him, but he hated to feel a burden, even if the reasonable part of him knew she would never think it. Moominmamma tried to gently shoo him away, but eventually relented and let him peel some potatoes, while Moomintroll joined his mother by the stove.

'It feels strange to prepare a meal knowing that no-one will arrive,' she said, a little wistfully. 'I've gotten so used to guests.'

Of course. Everyone else in the valley would be gearing up - or rather, slowing down for their hibernation. That was a something Snufkin hadn't registered until now, and he couldn't say it wasn't a relief. It was likely to send him stir-crazy at some point, but if he was ever going to go through this, it might as well be deep in the winter time when absolutely no one would bother him.

Sniff was surely asleep. With the surroundings being so quiet that afternoon, he realised that the muffled groaning he thought he could hear as they'd approached the house was probably snoring coming from his burrow. His parents were rarely in the area this late for much the same reason; The Muddler dedicated a lot of time in the lead-up to checking over their collections, before settling down for a good few months' rest with his wife.

The Snork and Snorkmaiden might've been too, if they were this side of the world. It was impossible to guess where they might be these days. Since setting off from Moominvalley around a decade ago to travel the globe, with the aid of one of Snork's inventions, they'd covered quite a loud of ground - and air. Snufkin and Snorkmaiden would often swap experiences of where they'd been and suggest places of interest for the next trip.

They'd write the Moomins out of the blue once, perhaps twice a year, and arrive not long after their letters with great tales of adventure, which were always a treat to listen to, as Snorkmaiden had a talent for regaling stories - especially if they involved her brother, who she was especially good at imitating; the two irritated the life out of each other, but were ultimately inseparable.

Too-Ticky might make return in the New Year, but she wasn't one for spreading gossip. Unless she was confident that you weren't either, which Snufkin wasn't, then she'd talk your ear off.

Little My was liable to show up again soon, but that was a fact he'd come to terms with long ago. He wouldn't be surprised if someone reached for an onion in the pantry at some point only to get a nasty nip instead. Snufkin lightly kicked against the shelving just to make sure.

They'd have an awful lot to explain come the spring, but that seemed so far from now.
Later in the night, when all had quieted down and the exhaustion of the day's events finally hit, Snufkin almost felt about ready to sleep for a month himself. He and Moomintroll were upstairs in his bedroom. A silvery light from the tiny attic window landed on the panelling as the clouds passed - they were starting to chip at the bottom, showing their original green. Moomintroll had painted them a more sensible beige one year, as he thought an adult ought to, but soon became tired of all that and decorated around the skirting with colourful little flowers instead. Snufkin helped; he had a much steadier paw.

They had time to themselves again, as the parents were wrapped up in different parts of the house with other things: Moominpappa was writing at his desk as the moon rose, all the excitement had appealed to his creative side; Moominmamma was busy stitching in the drawing room, even though she'd been assured by Snufkin that there was no rush, and it wasn't something he couldn't handle himself.

He pulled at the large woollen socks that were hitched up his legs underneath his dress - a gaudy old pair of Moomintroll's that had been fished out of the bottom of his bedding chest, knitted by his mother some years ago in response to his winter wanderings. ('Not that I ever wore them,' he explained, blushing.) They itched the inside of his knees where the fur was thinner, but he'd remembered too late that they'd left his nightclothes and the rest behind in the tent, and it would have to wait until morning.

The sleeping bag was of course packed with them, so Snufkin was invited into Moomintroll's suitably large bed, where he'd huddled up under the dense sheets and his warm body. He rested his heavy snout on top of him, arms around his chest. His breathing was very slow and contented.

'You aren't hibernating, are you?' asked Snufkin. He felt Moomintroll hum into the back of his head.

'No. No, no,' he yawned. 'No. I promise. Just ... just thinking, really.'

'Oh?' Snufkin caught it, too. 'What about?'

'Something and nothing. It's been ages since we last cuddled up for the winter, do you remember?' Moomintroll cautiously slid his fingers further down, relaxing when Snufkin’s joined to curl around them. 'You said something about us 'having lovely dreams, and when we wake it will be spring', or the like.'

'Did I now?' said Snufkin, distantly. It had been such a long time ago. Moomintroll nuzzled against his hair.

'Yes. You were an old romantic even then.'

Snufkin laughed into the quilt, pulling it closer. 'You think I'm romantic?'

'Oh very, in an enigmatic sort of way,' he replied. 'You know, if anyone had told me back when I was a child that we'd be expecting our own together one day, I could have never believed it.' There was a slight choke in his voice.

'You've come over all sentimental,' said Snufkin.

'Well,' Moomintroll breathed gently into his ear. 'Hard not to.'
An otherwise uneventful week went by, with Snufkin coping better than he’d expected of himself. There had been a moment, nothing more than a fleeting thought, when he’d travelled back to his tent alone to fetch some belongings, and found his fingers gripping one of the wooden pegs. Winter seemed to be settling in late that year; if he was quick about it, there would still be time before the valley was snowed under. And then it was gone.

Apart from that, there had really only been one more bit of unpleasantness to deal with. Something that was really asking too much of him.

True, he’d balked at the idea of giving up his pipe habit, although he could reconcile with the reasoning for that, and staying out of the cold air for too long was hardly an issue when it wasn’t much joy to walk in anyway, but he was absolutely grief-stricken upon being told it’d be in the little one’s best interest to avoid eating any more fish for the time being. Snufkin knew it irrational to consider it so, but he couldn’t help but feel that – being a fair amount of the very few things that he took great pleasure in - they’d been specifically chosen just to spite him.

It had been enough to send him spiralling back into his maudlin again: ‘I suppose next you’ll be telling me I can’t breathe too hard, and that’s my music gone for the foreseeable future,’ he’d griped to The Mymble, who’d been the one rattling off these inconvenient facts on a passing visit to Moominhouse.

She and Moominmamma were together on the couch, with their piping hot tea cooling on the end table. The fire had been lit, and if it weren't for the snow gathering on the window frame, it would feel almost like early spring. Moomintroll and his father had gone out foraging to replenish the pantry; it had been agreed that they’d all skip the tradition of hibernating this year, just to keep an eye on things, and they could hardly stay active on pine-needles all season. Snufkin was curled into an armchair by himself, already sulking about how he’d been done out of a break from the ever-increasing monotony, ‘what with the chill in the air today.’

'Now, don’t get all surly on us, Snufkin,' she chided, gesturing at his pointed scowl. She reached for her drink and blew some of its heat away. ‘It’s best you know. And not at all, as a matter of fact, I’d encourage it. Goodness knows you’ll need the practice for when-- well, when the time comes.'

Snufkin frowned and hid behind his scarf. He wasn't sure he wanted to know any more. He shuddered a bit at the idea, and again as an uncomfortable swooping passed through his stomach. Scrunching up his face, Snufkin rested an arm across his middle and waited for it to settle.

'Something the matter, dear?' came Moominmamma's much softer voice.

'No, not a bit,' he replied, opening his eyes again. 'Just some indigestion. Really, it’s fine.'

She raised her eyebrows at his mother, who then whispered something in response under her breath.

Mymble tapped a nail against her cup thoughtfully. 'Mm. And – just out of curiously - does this ‘indigestion’ happen a lot?'

'I suppose it does,' he replied, anxiously. Her sudden questioning wasn’t helping his unease. 'Not too often just, now and again. But that’s typical, isn’t it?'
Moominmamma and his mother shared a knowing look. Snufkin wished they wouldn’t do that; he’d make some passing comment and they’d gaze at him pitifully with their smug understanding, and it would only make him feel more and more out of his depth.

'Haven’t you been reading the book I gave you?' asked Mymble, gently.

'Er--' Now he felt a tad guilty. It had been sitting in the side-table drawer of Moomintroll’s bedroom for about a week, and he’d gone and forgotten all about it. 'No, I haven’t. Sorry. There’s been so much on my mind.'

Fortunately, she nodded sympathetically, and bent forward to take his paw in hers.

'That’s the baby you’re feeling, Snufkin. It’s probably quickening,' said Mymble, as though it were a completely adequate explanation.

Snufkin stared at her in bewilderment.

'Moving around,' she added, patiently.

'They do that?’ The question sounded almost childish, but he never had reason to give it any thought. If anyone had asked him, he probably would have just imagined that they stayed put until they were born – and as if to convince him, there came another slight turn a little below where the first had been.

'Oh,' Snufkin slid his paw from under his mother’s grip and placed it on top his other, 'oh, goodness.'

Strangely enough, it didn’t feel so uncomfortable anymore.

Chapter End Notes

drive-by 20 year recap!
this one took a bit because I apparently Cannot write reactions, hope you don't find it too cheesy!
The Arrival of Winter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Whilst late November had been bearable despite the changing air, much of December was proving to be a tiring slog. Up until now, Snufkin had been far too focused on other things to care about being stuck indoors - like how the little one would suddenly brush against him, and anticipating the next time it did - but now that the lingering shock of it all had finally settled, and there wasn't anything left to distract him, being confined to Moominhouse was becoming almost suffocating.

If winter had been late arriving, then it was certainly making up for lost time; near-constant snowfall and howling winds battered against the windows day and night. He'd sit and watch it from the attic for what felt like hours. The only saving grace was that it kept his mother at bay. Not that he felt any ill toward her, but she could be so overbearing with her visits, and he'd have no choice but to make an appearance whenever she arrived. Snufkin didn't care for how she seemed to think his mounting irritation with just about everything and everyone quite cute, and “strangely nostalgic”, as she'd put it.

And wasn't there an awful lot to be irritated about: Snufkin would wake in pitch darkness even long into the morning, and fall asleep to it too, hardly ever catching a sliver of sunlight in-between, which only soured his mood further. He'd try and sit on the veranda in the breaks of harsh weather, but was gently reprimanded for doing so. It was so easy for the days to blend into one another that Snufkin could have cried the morning he’d dared to check the calendar by the fireplace, just to discover that it was somehow only the 8th.

There were only so many songs he could play to pass the time, and the risk of coming to despise his own music prevented him from doing so too often. Moomintroll tried to be of help; he’d report back from his errands whenever he had chance to leave, telling him all about the rare birds who were arriving for the season, or describing how enchanting the woodland looked in the snow, which worsened the sense that he was missing out on something.

It was getting to the point where Snufkin found himself envying the idea of hibernation, but he wasn’t sure he could even if he wanted to. The baby, whether by his awareness or just a matter of how these things progressed, was starting to become rather more demanding of him. He could barely recall a time where he didn't feel near to famished, even the most desperate of winters alone hadn't been this hard, and this was without using up any energy. How was it possible that something so little needed so much? It was really the only thing that could force him out of his isolation these days, and even then it was rare, with Moomintroll more often than not bringing his plate to the room.

He had run these concerns by Moominmamma, and was assured that she'd experienced much the same with Moomintroll, who at that moment happened to be eagerly finishing up a bowl of cabbage stew that he'd been surprisingly unable to stomach. Snufkin almost made a comment in dry disbelief, but managed to hold it.

Though it gave him peace of mind, an unfortunate result of sharing his worries with Moominmamma is that she'd doted on him even more. It was always “what would Snufkin prefer for dinner?” and “should we chop another log for the fire, dear?” He resented being waited on like this. Of course, she insisted that it was no bother, no bother at all, but to put them to all this trouble when they would usually have their heads down for the year deepened his guilt.
‘How did you pass the winter?’ he'd asked one particularly dull afternoon, or only just, as the clock had struck twelve mere moments ago. Snufkin was resting on Moomintroll's bed, where he'd taken to spending most of his time lately. It was easier on the aches than his own, and all the better with Moomintroll in it, which he was, reclining with his ankles crossed and his arms behind his head.

He furrowed his brow in thought. It wasn’t a problem he’d dealt with in a long while, he seemed to have outgrown being a light sleeper.

‘Let’s see. Little My found some old driftwood on the shore once, and we used it as a toboggan - I don’t think so, Snufkin,’ warned Moomintroll as he sprang up; Snufkin lay back again, dejectedly. ‘Really, there isn’t much else that I can remember, at least that’d be any good to you. I was always lucky enough to wake most Januaries, so I didn't have long to wait until spring. In fact... a lot of the time, I'd think about seeing you again.’

And beside him Snufkin fell very quiet. Yes, he could sympathise, perhaps even more so now. He didn't much like the idea of Moomintroll spending those long winter days doing nothing but waiting. He would have much preferred for him to stay blissfully unaware, and then he'd return as if no time had passed at all.

Moomintroll noticed the change in mood and rolled over to rest a paw on his middle. Something stirred to his touch, though he hadn't felt it himself. He'd been fairly put out upon learning that he'd have to wait a bit longer for that.

Snufkin did the same, frowning as he glanced down. ‘Would you say it's obvious?’

‘Afraid so,’ said Moomintroll with a half-smile, shifting closer.

He rubbed his nose with the back of his thumb. ‘I'd say it's more soup than child,’ he murmured, which earned an amused huff into his neck.

The weeks continued to crawl by into mid-December. Just as Snufkin was beginning to feel on the cusp of going stir-crazy, an opportunity for a break from it all finally presented itself. He knew it immediately, from the warm red shining through the curtains and over his closed eyes, and the way his body didn't feel chilled to the bone even underneath the blankets and Moomintroll's fur. The thermometer by the front door showed a more encouraging temperature than it had in weeks, and though he was still inside, the thought of the sun on his face again already made him feel brighter.

‘I'm going to take a stroll,’ he announced as it approached midday. He'd waited until a safe time to mention it, when the weather would be at its warmest and Moomintroll too busy helping with the cooking to follow after. His parents had appeared slightly dismayed by the idea, but knew well enough by now that very little could be done to change Snufkin's mind once it was set.

Yet he'd still stepped forward expectantly, and Snufkin had to be more forceful.

‘Alone,’ he stressed.

Moomintroll's shoulders sagged in visible disappointment. ‘I thought so.’ He'd kept his voice
neutral, though the crease around his eyes suggested otherwise. But then something seemed to flicker behind them, and his demeanour - perhaps a little too quickly - became more accepting. He probably realised there wasn't much use in fighting it. 'Wrap up, though, won't you?'

Snufkin agreed to that much, pulling on the old wool coat that he stored in their wardrobe. It barely reached past his hips these days, but it would do. He didn't see the point in parting with something as long as it did the job. He left with a promise that he wouldn't be more than an hour, if that, and stepped outside properly for the first time in weeks.

Snufkin clicked his heels together in delight as he skipped from the veranda, inhaling the smell of the pines blowing in from the forest and savouring the light on his fur. Oh, how he'd missed it. The sharp breeze burnt in his nose even through the thick scarf, but anything was an improvement on the stagnant air of a building. He tread carefully through the under layer of snow; the change in temperature had been enough to freeze solid the blanket that had been growing steadily since the start of the month. Being away from the company of Moominhouse, it struck him just how quiet the winters were around here. On the rare occasions the weather had kept him from leaving by the autumn, he'd been too focused on racing against it to take in the tranquillity of the season.

Every little sound that broke the silence echoed through the valley: the steady crunching underfoot, icicles dripping softly onto the ground, and the distant, mournful call of the winter birds from the trees. It would have been tempting just to sit and admire them for a while, but it was still too cold to linger, and he hadn't even paused a moment or so before he was given - if he didn't know better - what felt like an insistent nudge to move on.

'You're up rather late today.' He closed the coat further around him. 'Not too cold, I hope.'

It had been a shame to learn that moomins were born with both their ears and eyes shut - mumriks too, going by his mother's reminiscing - so they probably weren't paying him much attention. Still, it didn't hurt to try, and Snufkin had a habit of speaking aloud if no-one were around to hear, anyway.

Snufkin ended up making his way back long before he'd said; another storm seemed to be brewing on the horizon, but that brief trip was all he'd needed to recharge for a while. The bustling in the kitchen told him that he'd returned before lunch was even finished (he should really make an effort to join them today), but oddly enough, there was no sign of Moomintroll.

He shucked his wet shoes off at the doorway along with the coat and padded upstairs toward the bedroom, only to find it locked, which was very peculiar. Snufkin knocked lightly. There was a sudden hiss of pain, and a familiar voice grumbled out 'damned thing', making the tips of his ears prickle with embarrassment.

'Moomintroll?'

'Snufkin!' came his muffled squeak. 'I didn't know - sorry, Snuff - I didn't know that you, uh, hold on, now--' The rambling was replaced by desperate rustling and creaking, while he waited outside in bemusement. Eventually, the lock turned, followed by a more collected, though slightly breathless, 'come in.'
Snufkin opened the door gingerly, wondering what on earth he was going to find behind it.

Moomintroll was perched uncomfortably up-right on the bed stool at the back of the room, further away than his voice had carried from, with his arms folded. ‘Good walk then?’ he asked, in a much higher tone than usual.

‘Yes, thank you.’ Snufkin mirrored him, smiling playfully. ‘And what are you up to?’


‘Mm.’ He probably would have pressed it further, if it weren’t for the slick of red fur trickling down his elbow. ‘Oh my, you’re bleeding.’

‘Am I?’ he asked distractedly; Moomintroll turned over his paw. ‘So I am. I’d best go and wash this off.’ He carefully pinched his finger and crossed to the door, stopping just before the threshold. ‘Don- um, don’t – . . . I’ll just go and wash.’ The door clicked shut behind him.

Left by himself, Snufkin took a quick peek around and noticed that one of the blanket throws was conspicuously bunched up on the mattress. There was a tell-tale spot of red on top. He’d almost reached for it, but Moomintroll wasn’t one to usually keep secrets, and it wouldn’t be right to pry, so he left it be.

Moomintroll excused himself early from dinner that evening. He’d seemed antsy all the while, and the second the last bite was taken, gave a hurried thanks to his parents and practically sprinted back up the stairs.

Snufkin was perturbed, and was about to follow after him when he felt Moominmamma's touch on his shoulder: ‘Won't you help me tidy these plates away, dear? If you're feeling up to it,’ she asked, sweetly, which he was more than happy to. Snufkin gathered up what he could from the table, missing the wink that passed from her to Moominpappa when he'd gone to rise from his chair.

‘Is Moomintroll all right?’ he asked quietly, passing a plate over.

‘Thank you. How do you mean?’

‘Oh, I don't know,’ sighed Snufkin as she twisted the tap. ‘He seems - avoidant? Cagey. It's not like him.’

‘I wouldn't worry. He's probably just over-excited and doesn't know what to do with himself.’

‘Seems a bit late for that.’

‘Well, people can take a while to adjust to these things.’ Then Moominmamma didn't speak for a while, stopping to hum merrily while she scrubbed at the cutlery. ‘It's possible that it's only just hit him - do you know, I remember one night, I'd finally dropped off for the most peaceful sleep I'd had in months, and suddenly Moominpappa was shaking me back awake, to inform me that we were going to have a child. This was a month before Moomintroll was born, mind.’

Snufkin chuckled, taking back a plate and drying it with the tea towel. Moomintroll had been much
more considerate than that, but he supposed there was always time for him to start acting funny. It wasn't as if he himself hadn't taken a good month to understand the idea that there was actually something there inside of him, and had been for some time, which was now starting to take up a considerable amount of room. He smoothed down the front of his dress, blushing and returning to his drying when he noticed Moominmamma eyeing him.

‘Thank you for your help, dear, I can take care of the rest of these.’ Snufkin made to say something, but Moominmamma gently took the towel from his grip. ‘Really, now, it's no trouble. Why don't you go and see where Moomintroll's gone off to?’ She suggested warmly, so he did.

He'd just made it to the top of the stairs when Moomintroll himself came bounding around the corner, leaving them almost nose-to-nose to each other.

‘Goodness! I was just about to come and get you - here, there's something I want to show you.’

Snufkin was guided into his room and took a seat on the edge of the bed, whilst Moomintroll reached awkwardly under the frame and pulled out the very same throw from earlier, now with a thin string tied around it. He realised, with a look of surprise, that it was wrapped up like a present, and that this was what all the mystery had been about. Snufkin drummed his fingers across his knee in nervous anticipation. Presents weren't usually something he was very good at receiving, and Moomintroll seemed to be going to a lot of extravagance for it - or as much as he'd been able to.

‘I didn't have any paper,’ he explained shyly as he sat next to Snufkin, eagerly swinging his legs over the side of the mattress, even though nowadays they were simply too long and grazed the floor.

‘I think I know what this is.’

Moomintroll’s ears drooped with his eyebrows. ‘You do?’

‘Yes,’ replied Snufkin. ‘It’s whatever you were hiding from me this morning, isn’t it?’

He immediately perked up again. ‘I was worried you’d peeked,’ he said, and Snufkin clutched his chest, scandalised, though he had been considering it.

Moomintroll deposited the lumpy gift into his lap. Snufkin worked his claws under the string, which fell away easily, and slowly opened the blanket; folded rather neatly inside the centre of it was a square of light blue fabric. There was something oddly familiar about it, but he couldn't place quite what - that is, until he lifted the fabric and turned it, and his gaze landed on the sleeves that were tucked together on the underside. They were a slightly grubby white colour with wide, faded pink stripes, a little frayed at the ends where some threads had come loose, and Snufkin knew exactly where he'd seen these before.

‘I hope you don’t mind that I did this.’ Moomintroll twiddled his fingers anxiously. 'They haven’t been touched for many years, I know, but – um—’

He trailed off as Snufkin unravelled the dress, as it clearly was now, holding it high above his head for a better look. They were indeed his old clothes, sewn together to make something else entirely.

‘Is... this for me?’

Moomintroll nodded, waggling his ears.
Snufkin trailed a finger down the materials. The main part, where it was blue, he remembered from one late spring celebration in the valley: everyone had the idea to dress up nice for the occasion, except for Snufkin, who owned nothing more than his green outfit. He didn't much mind, it was the others who insisted on finding something else, and it had been his eldest sister who'd gone and brought out a pale, raggedy tunic from her wardrobe. The years of use had softened out any unpleasant scratchiness, so he'd gladly accepted it.

For the sleeves, and around the collar and hem, it was a shirt of his own - well, once he'd pinched it from an unattended washing line, it was. He'd been wearing it the very evening Sniff and Moomintroll drifted ashore on their little raft on the way to the Lonely Mountains. He hadn't laid eyes on it in near thirty years; Snufkin swore he could almost smell the charred wood and sulphur from the comet's aftermath.

'I hope it doesn't feel too new now. I did make sure to wash them lots beforehand.' Moomintroll rubbed a pawful of the worn fabric between his fingers. 'I even rolled it down the mountain for good measure,' and Snufkin grinned at the image of an ungainly troll chasing after a tightly packed ball of old rags, though the edges of his lips were starting to twitch; dear Moomintroll, he was always so thoughtful.

His mouth worked slowly for a few seconds before anything would come out. 'Wherever did you find these?'

'At the bottom of the bedding chest, with the socks. But it was Mamma's idea, really,' explained Moomintroll, humbly. 'One day you took them off and never wore them again, and they just sort of stayed there. We never threw them out. I'm not sure why.

Snufkin lifted his head and blinked hard, pushing back the growing lump in his throat. Fortunately, he was able to hide his face in the fabric of his old green dress as it was pulled over his head, leaving it crumpled beside his bedroll, with the slightly melancholy thought that that was the last time he'd be wearing it for a good while.

Moomintroll watched on nervously as Snufkin slipped into his handiwork, scanning every part of his face for any sort of clue to his thoughts, and released a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding when he stood and turned, grinning broadly. It did look very nice on him, although, maybe there was a slight problem: because he'd been planning in secret, Moomintroll hadn't actually been able to check what a good fit would be, and now he could see - with some embarrassment - that the skirt trailed below his knees, and its sleeves fell over the middle of his paws.

'I might've overcompensated.' There was a tinge of pink growing on his snout. 'I didn't want it to be uncomfortable.'

Snufkin, however, grabbed a tight fistful of the ends and balled them up enthusiastically. 'I like it this way!' He hopped back up beside him. Moomintroll felt a swell of pride in his chest at the way his tail was beating against the bed. He looped his own around it, and a tender arm around his neck, which Snufkin leaned into happily.

'I really do,' he said in a small voice, so quietly that Moomintroll almost hadn't heard it. 'Thank you.'
Chapter End Notes

with art! because, why not.
I think I might just finally unanon today for, you know, Obvious reasons haha.
New Year's Fortune

Chapter Summary

content warning for dysphoria, and a brief mention of misgendering. the rest around it is a much more delightful read I promise.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘Good heavens!’

The cry must have been loud enough to ring through the entire house. It began in the previously quiet little nook downstairs that Moominpappa had settled himself into, pencil and pipe in paw while there was time to enjoy it.

He’d sprung from his bed a half hour before, as if the spark of inspiration he’d received had been lit under him. It was still quite early, just before nine, and the late winter dawn had yet to break; Moominpappa always favoured working in the twilight hours to really get the words flowing, and was in fact so deep into his writing, that he’d failed to notice the frankly cumbersome shape shimmying up the side of the house.

The Joxter had made an unexpected visit through the drawing room window and scared him half to death, the very cause of the exclamation (and a few more choice words after.)

‘Is that any way to greet an in-law?’

‘Off my work, you filthy old scoundrel!’ he managed to bellow once he’d caught his breath.

The entrance had landed him right on top of Moominpappa’s papers, leaving great muddy prints on the first in the pile, which was then sent all about the room in the rush to rectify his mistake.

There was another loud yelp as they scattered every which way, a few slipping under various pieces of furniture at every worst possible angle.

Looking over the snow, dirt, and tipped tobacco that he’d tracked over the desk, The Joxter had the decency to at least appear sorry for a passing moment, before breaking out into a self-satisfied grin - which grew further at the sight of Moominpappa comically stumbling over the melting ice in his haste to grab for his work, and eventually falling flat on his tail.

Joxter bent down and offered an arm. ‘My poor friend, are you all right?’ he asked, sounding somewhat insincere through raucous laughter.

‘Get away, you- you menace!’ Moominpappa swatted the helping paw away irritably as he started on picking up the first of the papers, which, to his horror, was sopping wet at the bottom. ‘Now look at what you’ve done!’ He peered closer to asses the damage; fortunately, only the blank edge of the latest page had caught the worst of it. It wouldn’t be of any use for writing - not that it mattered now, since his words had flown away, too.

The Joxter raised them back apologetically and, trying to compose himself, cheerfully held out one
that had floated by his feet, which Moominpappa snatched away.

‘We’ve a door, you know, and it’s always open,’ he seethed, despite the sentiment.

‘Yes, but it’s so early. I didn’t like to disturb you.’

Moominpappa froze in his collecting and gave him an exasperated stare.

‘I am very sorry,’ said Joxter, smile still on his face. Moominpappa simply shook his head and blew air from his nose in frustration. ‘I thought you’d be up in your bedroom at this hour.’

‘No,’ he grunted. ‘Most of us make use of the day. I was struck by a wonderful streak of inspiration and came down here to work in the perfect light, until someone came barrelling through the window and spoilt it.’ Joxter waved his paws again and sat back up on the desk. ‘And you’d best not pass any germs onto me; Mymble told us you were laid up with some dreadful flu.’

‘I’m well, Moominpappa, thank you for asking,’ he teased, stretching out and pulling his legs underneath him. ‘Anyway, I’m not here to visit you. I came to—ah-

The Joxter stopped and pointed upwards as the boards above them creaked with movement, which continued slowly down the stairs and into the hall.

Moomintroll peeked around the corner, eyes widened in concern at the kerfuffle, widening further when he realised who happened to be curled up on his father’s desk.

‘Oh, it’s you!’ he said, joyfully, strolling up to greet The Joxter, who raised a lazy arm and gradually got to his feet.

‘Yes, I often think that,’ came a disgruntled voice from somewhere below, a remark that was followed by a good-natured prod from the end of his boot when he passed.

‘Moomintroll, my dear boy.’ Joxter wrapped his lithe arms up around him best he could, giving him a hearty slap on the back. ‘How are you?’

He nodded brightly. ‘Good, good - and yourself?’ The Joxter responded in kind as he stepped back. Moomintroll glanced around him curiously. ‘Is The Mymble with you?’

‘No, but I am.’ And out from behind the window-frame appeared Little My, who dropped onto the desk with an impressive thud, pointing an accusing finger at Moominpappa. ‘What a mess you’ve made in here!’

‘I’ve made!’ he blustered, making a great fuss of lowering himself under his chair and gathering up the remaining papers, but not before firmly shutting the window.

‘She’s busy preparing for the new year’s celebrations,’ explained Joxter, who - despite being both closer to the ground and actually the more agile of the two - seemed content to simply watch. ‘We’re been kicked out for the day, you see. She seems to think we’ll only get in the way.’

‘Can’t imagine why,’ muttered Moominpappa darkly from under the chair.

Moomintroll finally took notice of his father and knelt to help gather the papers. ‘Goodness me. The new year already, is it,’ he thought out loud. It was very easy to lose track of time lately, when the snowfall stilled the valley for weeks on end, when there was so much else to think about.

A day later and it would be January, which would soon fade into February, and March would be
where he’d usually wake and wait by the river for a speck of green to break through the bare trees, growing ever larger with the warmth in his chest.

Though it didn’t always happen that way: sometimes Snufkin would already be there, if the mood had suited him, and the pull of the harmonica would seep into his dreams; other times he might not show until far into the spring, but never so late that Moomintroll would worry. He would always return, just as they had done many years ago. It was their promise to each other. Funny to think it wasn't Snufkin's arrival he awaited this time.

Moomintroll crawled out from under the furniture at the sound of another set of footsteps descending the stairs; his mother's, for certain, and sure enough she called out a pleasant morning to the house, still a hint of sleepiness in her voice.

‘Good morning, Mamma. Joxter and Little My are in here,’ he said, and the two gave a friendly wave as Moominmamma entered the room.

‘Oh, yes, I watched them climb through the window,’ she said, calmly. Moominpappa looked up incredulously. ‘I’ll set another plate of pancakes aside today. Come in for breakfast, you two.’

She’d barely finished her sentence before Little My made a beeline for the kitchen, The Joxter sauntering on behind. Moominpappa followed shortly after, once he was satisfied that his writing was in order, his annoyance forgotten in the face of a delicious breakfast.

Moomintroll looked to the ceiling instead. ‘I’ll see if Snufkin is awake yet.’

---

Snufkin was; wide awake, in fact, for far longer than Moomintroll. Somewhere in the night there had been a dream. Not the usual kind, about travelling through the mountains and the wood and the like - an unpleasant one. And the trouble with unpleasant ones is that they could turn your entire day on its head before it even started.

The more he wanted to forget, the clearer it seemed to become: a pair of faceless – hemulens, were they? Or even moomins? Big enough for him to have stood right under their noses while they talked of him at least, and they hadn’t even cared to notice. Maybe the reason for that was because it wasn't actually about Snufkin, he could tell himself. After all, whoever the subject of their haughty judgement was, they'd never called her by name.

Hearing Moomintroll push open the door was both a relief and an inconvenience; there’d be something else for him to focus on now, but it meant having to face the rest of them eventually.

‘Are you up?’ he asked, gently.

Snufkin had considered lying very still until he left again, though Moomintroll would only fret about him sleeping in so late, and so reluctantly, he lifted his head from under the covers.

‘Good morning – I didn’t wake you, did I?’ Snufkin shook his head slowly as he emerged. ‘Little My and your father are visiting.’

‘I heard,’ he replied; it was sharper than even he’d expected, and now Moomintroll was looking at him funny.
‘Are you all right, Snuff? Is anything wrong?’

Snufkin tightened his jaw. There was certainly a lot he could think of, but none of it wanted to be said. ‘No one even questioned it,’ was what eventually came out some moments later, barely above a whisper.

‘Pardon?’

He shifted so that the quilt fell slightly. Moomintroll saw the book underneath it; a curl of sadness tightened around his gut as the weight of Snufkin’s words settled. ‘You’ll only twist yourself up reading that,’ he said kindly.

Snufkin didn’t appear to be listening. He ran a heavy paw over his face.

Moomintroll climbed under the sheets with him. A lock of hair was brushed away from his creased brow. ‘They probably just didn’t want to worry you.’

‘They did a fine job.’

Neither of them spoke for a time after that. Moomintroll lowered his touch from Snufkin’s head, now resting against him, down to his face, brushing a large thumb across his cheek from his closed eyes.

It was he who finally decided to break the silence: ‘You were never one for rules, anyway.’

The corner of Snufkin’s mouth pulled into the slightest smile at that, maybe involuntarily, but enough for the positivity it brought to wash over him. He could feel the hum in Moomintroll’s chest in his entire body as he too relaxed under him.

‘Do you feel better?’

‘No,’ he answered honestly. But he held Moomitroll’s paws under the quilt. ‘In a while.’

They’d made their way down just as the pancakes cooled. Little My had given them a suspicious look when they entered together paw-in-paw after what was meant to be a short wake-up call, but was too preoccupied with her breakfast to bother saying anything.

The Joxter immediately rose from the table and hugged his son, more carefully than with Moomintroll, apologising for his long absence.

‘I would’ve visited sooner, but I’ve been dreadfully sick. You might’ve heard,’ he explained dramatically, once they’d all settled at the table.

‘It was a cold. And Mamma had to drag him in,’ interjected Little My. ‘The fool wanted to sleep in his tree.’

Snufkin didn’t look over when a furry elbow nudged his side.

‘Moominmamma, I wondered if I could trouble you for some of your delicious jam? For tonight, you see,’ asked his father; a tingle of awareness ran down Snufkin’s spine on his behalf. He could
never understand how some people could be so forward. ‘And I don’t mean in exchange for nothing - you’re all invited to the festivities, of course.’

There was a series of intrigued gasps and noises from the moomins. Snufkin might’ve reacted as well, if his mind hadn’t wandered elsewhere. He’d tried to subtly catch Moomintroll’s attention, there was something he was sure he’d like to know about, but he was too wrapped up in all the chatter to see him.

‘Certainly, dear, there’s no need for anything in return – but, oh, how exciting!’ Moominmamma reached across for another helping of it herself. ‘I can’t say if I’ve ever attended a new year celebration. No, I shouldn’t think we have.’

The Joxter made a cough into his arm that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Moominpappa glowering at him.

‘Actually, back when we were travelling on the Osh--’

‘Err, no, no, we haven’t, have we?’ he interrupted, raising his voice above Joxter’s, who quieted down and smirked behind his fingers. Little My let out a squeak around a mouthful of food that suggested she’d heard this before. ‘Yes, that would be very exciting. Thank you, Joxter.’

‘Snufkin, are you coming along, too? I know you’re not one for parties, but I thought you might like to get out of the house - Snufkin,’ He turned to his son, who hadn’t seemed to have noticed he was being spoken to, and appeared slightly alarmed when he looked up to find all eyes on him. ‘You seem a bit lost in thought there.’

‘Just thinking,’ he said distantly.

‘Well, yes,’ said Joxter with a fond smile. ‘What do you say?’

Snufkin ran the conversation back in his head: it had been a while since he’d done anything of note, and if Moomintroll was going to be there (which he most likely was, judging by the delighted expression), then he supposed it wouldn’t so bad. If he was being offered, then that must have meant that his mother was travelling to them, and not being far from the house, he’d have a space to slip away to if it all became too much.

‘Yes, I’ll come,’ replied Snufkin, to a group of pleasantly surprised faces. Then he stood with his empty plate, managing at last to lock eyes with Moomintroll, and gestured ever so slightly toward the sink.

Frowning in confusion, he got from his seat with his own plate and made to follow. Little My thrust hers out in front of him, grinning sweetly. It was taken with a scoff.

Snufkin was already running the water, so Moomintroll grabbed a cloth and waited beside him.

‘You don’t have to go, if you don’t want to,’ he said as low as possible, under the sound of the tap.

‘What makes you think I don’t want to?’ Snufkin asked, sincerely.

Moomintroll seemed taken aback by that. ‘Oh, I’d thought you’d wanted to talk, with this morning – and how quiet you just were.’

A look of realisation crossed his face. ‘That’s not why.’ Snufkin took a glance over his shoulder; everyone at the table was deep in discussion of tonight’s event. Without breaking his stare, he wrung his paws over the basin and reached for one of Moomintroll’s, bringing it down to just the
right spot – and not even a second later, if he was right, where they’d both felt it.

The conversation between the others was growing more animated. They probably weren’t going to focus on them any time soon, so Snufkin dared to turn back. Moomintroll was smiling in that perfect way, where his eyes and snout would crinkle together adorably, and he couldn’t help but do the same.

- 

The Mymble had telephoned for Joxter around 3 o’clock that afternoon, sounding perfectly relaxed despite the cacophony of children in the background. She would be arriving sometime in the evening, dependant on the turtle’s speed and when the preparations were finished; ‘could be six, seven, eight, perhaps nine’ they’d heard her tinny voice say from the other end (“That narrows it down,” Snufkin commented from the other side of the room, and Joxter chewed at his cheek.)

They were all to gather at her place to celebrate once she was there, it was decided. For now, the two older moomins set to work in the kitchen. Moominmamma just wasn’t content to show with anything less than practically a smörgåsbord’s worth of food to add to the party. Little My was meant to be helping, too, though it appeared she’d grown bored of her responsibilities and scurried off elsewhere; Snufkin could see the tiny prints on the doorstep, leading away like a trail of ants.

He was sitting at the table on the veranda, with a large leather-bound book that he’d found in the study, having been instructed to do nothing but rest up and wait. That usually made him feel terribly useless, but it was hard to stay upset about anything when the weather was so mild and he wasn’t cooped up for hours on end. And he wasn’t the only one here: his father was lounging across the railing, somehow comfortable with his body contorted over such a thin plank of wood; Moomintroll had also stepped out to keep him company. Really, it was likely that they’d gotten away from any chores under the pretence that they were keeping an eye on Snufkin.

Moomintroll nodded at the book. ‘Anything good?’

‘I'm not reading,’ he replied. The old spine made a pleasant crack as he thumbed further in. ‘I'm... thinking about names’

‘Oh! How lovely!’ exclaimed Moomintroll, clapping his paws together. ‘I didn't realise it was on your mind, too.’

‘Have you something yourself?’

‘Yes.’ He blinked absently. ‘Moomintroll and Moominmaiden.’

Snufkin may have lowered his face behind the book, but his shoulders were visibly shaking.

Moomintroll crossed his arms. ‘What? Those are perfectly respectable names.’

‘Not that those aren’t good choices,’ he reassured, peering above it, ‘but remember that they could be a mumrik.’ Which felt very strange to hear himself say. Somehow, it was easy to forget that he was a part of it.

‘I suppose you're right,’ agreed Moomintroll. He edged his chair closer, and for the first time, got a good look at what Snufkin was holding: there was a golden leaf embossed on the cover, under a
title detailing the sights of the valley. ‘Why are you looking in a botany guide?’

Snufkin flashed a shy smile. ‘I think flowers have beautiful names.’

‘Is that so,’ he said, innocently. ‘In that case, what about this one?’ Moomintroll craned forward to point out a sketch of a white flower with thin petals; it was labelled 'Jasmine'.

Snufkin hummed vaguely in agreement, before something about it very slowly slotted into place. ‘Be serious.’

Moomintroll bit back a laugh, tapping a finger on something he’d spotted further down the list. ‘Oh, 'Lilja! I imagine if they had white fur, or were bright orange all over, like you. Wouldn't that be sweet?’

‘I - I hadn't thought of that,’ mumbled Snufkin. He hadn't once put their looks into the equation, either. When he did daydream about their child, they were just a sort of a haze of bundle, an idea - and that wasn't even getting onto the subject of mymbles, and whatever lay hiding in his father's estranged lot. It was a dizzying concept, really, so he returned to the book. 'Lupine', isn't that nice,’ he mused to himself.

Though he'd tried to hold it, there was an unmistakable chuckle next to him.

‘What.’

‘Nothing,’ sighed Moomintroll, glancing upwards.

‘What?’

‘Never mind,’ he said with a shake. ‘Maybe we should wait until we know if we have a son or daughter to settle on a name. See what suits them.’

‘I could tell you, if you like,’ contributed The Joxter, startling them both. They'd quite forgotten that he was even dozing on the veranda with them.

‘How?’ Moomintroll asked in wonderment.

He waved his paws in the air mysteriously. ‘I’m more than a bearer of bad news, you know.’ A series of pained grunts escaped him with the effort of sitting up, which rather ruined the illusion. ‘Hup. Actually, it was all in the reading, wouldn’t you believe.’

Snufkin shrugged as Moomintroll stared at him, puzzled. If there really had been any sign, then he was none the wiser. He hadn't even understood the spread by himself.

‘Care to hear?’ asked his father.

‘I’ll wait,’ he quickly decided. It hardly mattered - if people could be wrong about these things, then cards were surely no exception, and the thrill of the unknown was always more interesting to him. It would make for a pleasant surprise when they did come.

Moomintroll, meanwhile, was fidgeting in his seat and looking very giddy.

‘Do you want to?’ Though Snufkin already knew the answer.

‘Ye-es,’ he replied, shyly, and raised his eyebrows at Joxter. ‘Well, now that you’ve said it, you’ve got me curious. If it's all right with you, of course, Snufkin,’ he added, who set down the book and gave his approval. Hard not to when he was so endearingly eager about it.
‘So long as you keep it secret.’

He nodded seriously. The Joxter beckoned for him to move closer, and when Moomintroll leaned in, something very delicate was whispered into his ear. They were both smiling now, and there was a soft look in Moomintroll's eyes. Snufkin felt oddly left out of his own business.

It was a quarter after six when there was a melodic knock at the door. Moomintroll, being the closest, had answered it, and received a rib-crushing embrace from the visitor; The Mymble stepped inside, looking very merry indeed, dressed in an appropriately wine-coloured gown with a cozy fur trim. Her bun was held up by a thicker tie that had a strikingly golden flower on one side - artificial, given the season.

‘Hel-lo, Moomintroll! I do love your little ear ribbons, there. Very dapper.’

The end of his snout turned pink at the compliment whilst he flicked them. Moomintroll politely guided their guest to the couch, though he thought twice about offering a drink.

‘Evening, Moomin family!’ she said to no-one in particular, for the drawing room was empty except for them.

‘Is that you Mymble?’ replied Moominpappa from somewhere on the landing. ‘We'll be down in a minute.’

And true to his word, a minute later was when he came, with a shy Moominmamma in tow: she wasn't in her apron, but a flowing skirt of similar patterning, cheerful yellow stripes instead of the red - one paw anxiously clasped her handbag, and the other was curled around Moominpappa's; he gripped his cane on the opposite side, and was still wearing his dear old hat, a sprig of holly was fixed to the band.

‘Don't you two look gorgeous,’ gushed Mymble, a little louder than necessary. Moominmamma giggled behind her arm. ‘Where's my husband, then? Barely even dressed, I expect, lazy old bum.’

‘You wound me with your words, love.’ The Joxter was furled around the banister at the top of the staircase; he'd borrowed one of Moominmamma's old coats that she rarely touched - a deep blue one, not unlike how his own had used to look. Comically oversized on his little frame, of course, but such was his preference. He'd forgone his hat, proudly showing off the un-brushed strawberry mop that fell untidily over his eyes, which lit up at the sight of his wife.

‘Honestly.’ Mymble hung her head when she crossed to the stairs, cackling at the state of her partner. ‘You'll do, I suppose.’

She scooped The Joxter up into her powerful arms and planted a messy kiss to his rough nose.

The three moomins exchanged bashful looks, when fortunately, Little My came sliding into the room, her clothes and scornful expression giving the impression of an angry humbug.

‘Enough of that,’ she said, dismissively.

‘Hello, dear,’ Mymble responded, brightly. ‘Looking lovely, also, might I say.’
Snufkin was last to appear, same crumpled clothes as usual, and a black scarf wrapped snugly across his shoulders. He'd made a crown of leaves and berries for his hat brim. He hovered awkwardly on the landing as everyone turned, having hoped they'd be too involved with each other to notice him.

‘Take your time, now,’ warned his mother as he descended the stairs, and Snufkin paused to roll his eyes - but when he reached her, she complimented him on how very stylish the crown was, and that softened him a bit.

‘And - could this my handsome date for tonight?’ inquired Moomintroll, not quite with the same confidence as Mymble, but Snufkin flushed at his efforts, as did he.

Led by The Mymble, they all filed through the front door and crossed the short distance to her unusual home. The turtle was grazing lazily at some roots with a vacant expression, putting Snufkin in mind of his father.

Moomintroll was helping his mother carry the heavy basket of goods she'd prepared, which had been very well received by their gracious host. There was a light in every window, and each room seemed to be bustling with activity. He reached out for Snufkin's paw with his own free one and squeezed it; there was a softer squeeze back.

The noises, it soon turned out, were all from the numerous siblings. The gathering was strictly a family affair, which eased Snufkin's worries somewhat, as it wasn't anyone he didn't already know. He was just glad they all seemed to be as flighty as their parents, stopping to give their greetings and friendly new year's wishes, but ultimately too distracted by the allure of party activities to stick around for long.

It was all very disjointed, he thought, whilst they strolled through the hall: groups of teens were situated in various parts of the house - one was playing cards in the side room, another was deep into a very intense looking board-game. Some were dancing together in the kitchen. At least two radios were playing music from different rooms, far enough apart that they graciously didn't bleed into one unpleasant sound. Snufkin did wonder where on Earth his mother came by such pricey possessions sometimes. The one closest was tuned to some jaunty little yuletide song, which, though he'd never heard it before, he could tell Henry and Gabriel were absolutely not providing the right words to. Joxter had winked when they lowered their voices as he passed.

Mymble had brought them into the lounge, which was unoccupied, and lit a few candles on the windowsill. The ivory curtains were parted, allowing the silvery light from the high moon to stream across the gnarled wooden floor. A low table was pulled out to the centre of the chairs, where the contents of Moominmamma's basket had been unpacked on top of its chipped mosaic tiles. In the middle of the feast was a large pitcher surrounded by several glasses, all but one filled with a sweet wine.

‘Well! Now we're all together, I believe we ought to make a toast,’ announced Mymble, raising her drink. Each of the guests lifted theirs in turn, Snufkin holding up his tea a little hesitantly, for it was obvious what was coming. ‘To the new year - and new arrivals.’

They all cheerfully chorused against a clink and clashing of glasses, except Snufkin, who'd mouthed it halfheartedly and glanced away, feeling quite foolish at the attention. He hoped the music outside was enough to drown them out; the last thing he needed was the dozen others knowing. Unfortunately for him, it seemed they weren't done with the subject just yet.
‘You know, Joxter, I'd meant to ask: it was you who realised it, wasn't it?’ asked Moominpappa.

His father gulped down a mouthful of wine before answering. ‘Sort of. It was all the cards' work, really - and of course, dear Mymble. I just had to break it to the poor lad,’ he said, with a sympathetic paw on his knee. 'All he told me was that he had a 'bad feeling.'"

‘Ah, like your forebodings,’ said Moominpappa with a sage nod, and he turned to Snufkin. ‘But I thought you didn't have those?’

‘Something just seemed - off, I suppose,’ he said, wonderingly. ‘I couldn't tell you why.’

‘Gut instinct,’ supplied Little My. The red of his cheeks deepened as everyone around the table tried their best to suppress their giggles.

At least the conversation had finally started to move on; Little My's levity reminded their mother of an 'absolutely hysterical story' that she promised to share upon her return, excusing herself to refill the pitcher.

He heard Moomintroll snort into his glass beside him.

‘Don’t encourage her,’ said Snufkin, tiredly.

‘Mm. Probably not the last I'll hear that, eh?’

Moomintroll immediately clasped a paw to his mouth, and his conspicuously large eyes landed on Joxter, who was just as horrified and made a hushing shape with his lips. Luckily, no one else had paid them much mind, least of all Snufkin, who was busy looking anywhere but the group.

The two of them exchanged nervous smiles and finished their drinks in silence.

Chapter End Notes

edit: I drew up their new year's looks right here!

this got very long, sorry for the delay!! I was gonna split it but it worked better as one big ol chapter.

an immovable object (me not caring about gender) meets an unstoppable force (wanting moomin to be a himbo).

how does mymble's phone work? turtle magic.
He doesn't remember drifting off. It's darker than before. The moon must have passed behind the trees. For a while, all Snufkin is aware of is the smell of vanilla from the candles and the occasional rise and fall of Moomintroll's chest. He's speaking under his breath, but he can't quite grasp what's being said. It's the sound of his name that finally reaches him. Snufkin tries to move slightly before realising he's being held in place, and the paws around him drop with a flinch at his stirring.

'I didn't mean to wake you.' Moomintroll ran his fingers through his hair; Snufkin wondered vaguely where his hat was.

'Wasn't sleeping. Resting my eyes,' he replied, blearily. They're still in the lounge, just the two of them now. He can tell without even bothering to look; his mother's shrill voice carries from down the hall, accompanied by the squealing of party guests. Snufkin doesn't recall anyone leaving, nor moving to the sofa and into Moomintroll's lap, but that's where they are, curled together underneath the window. He knows from the draft slipping through its weak frame. 'I'll open them now. See - open.'

'Lies. You were definitely sleeping,' refuted Moomintroll. His top half shook under Snufkin's chin, thick fur tickling against his nose. 'They're still closed!'

'No, no.'

'Yes, yes.'

The breath from his laughter warmed his face as their snouts were pressed together. 'Couldn't wait until midnight?'

'No, I don't think you can,' said Moomintroll. 'There's still ten minutes to go yet.'

Snufkin's eyes finally snapped open at that - he'd anticipated a cat-nap, at the most. As it happened, he'd gone and missed most of the night. Though he couldn't say he was sad about it. When he unfurls himself, there's a nasty ache in his middle from where he lay hunched for too long. It loosened up with a stretch. 'Did you ask me something a minute ago? I was half-asleep.'

'Hm. I thought you said you weren't?' questioned Moomintroll; Snufkin gave a noncommittal shrug and shifted uncomfortably. 'I was - oh, maybe it's silly of me seeing as they can't hear it, but I was just talking to the baby, is all.' He peered down at him shyly, as though he's been caught at something terrible, but Snufkin can hardly judge when he's done the same.

'That's nice,' he said, watching Moomintroll perk up with the approval. 'How's the conversation going?'

'Well, it's very one-sided. So a lot like talking to you.'
'Tee-hee,' Snufkin said, monotonously, before he leant forward very suddenly, and the snickering beside him stopped.

A troubling squeeze had passed down him again. It's far from an unbearable pain, but it's something - he soon realises - that he's felt plenty of times before, and it certainly isn't one that should be happening now. Yet, through the haze of the panic, the memory of his mother's woolly estimate resurfaces from where he's locked it away, bringing with it the terrifying thought that there's every chance that it should be.

Moomintroll's arms hovered around him cautiously as he sat further upright, unsure what to do for the best. 'Snuff?'

Snufkin didn't answer him; the tightening wasn't releasing like it did before.

'Tell me what's wrong. Is- is it -?'

'I don't know,' he gasped to the ground. He couldn't bear to look at Moomintroll, because if he did he'd only worry further.

'Shall I go and get someone?'

He nodded slowly. 'Can... you find Moominmamma?' Maybe it wasn't her that he needed, but it was definitely who he wanted.

'Yes, of course,' A paw slipped down his leg and Moomintroll rose to his feet immediately. 'I'll be as quick as I can, don't worry. Everything's all right.' He sounded if he was trying to reassure himself more than anything.

Snufkin was left alone with his thoughts, the worst sort of company in these situations.

By the time Moomintroll had returned with his mother, the pain had passed, and while they hadn't taken more than a minute to get there, Snufkin had endured every second of it excruciatingly slowly. Ordinarily, he'd have found some comfort in his old hat, but he wasn't in the frame of mind to search for it.

He lowered his quivering paws from his face at the sofa dipping either side: Moomintroll reached an arm around him on the right, Moominmamma sat on his left, chucking him lightly under the chin. Despite the lingering fear, staring up into her warm, green eyes was already starting to put him at ease. Snufkin didn't know what it was about her, but Moominmamma had a marvellous way of making you believe that all would work out in the end so long as she was around.

'There, now. We'll figure this out. Does it still hurt, dear?' She asked in her calming voice. He shook his head. 'Anywhere else? Not your back?'

She seemed satisfied when he repeated the answer. Her shoulders drooped with the release of a well-hidden tension. 'It sounds very much like false labour to me; that's all, Snufkin.'

Hearing a word like that mentioned so offhandedly made him blanch. Moomintroll's touch seized up on his shoulder. 'Is that bad?'
‘No, no-o,’ she comforted. Her fingers curled around the back of his left paw and squeezed. It steadied somewhat. ‘It's all very normal. Just your body 'getting ready', as it were. I know, it must have been quite a shock - don't you worry, it won't be the real thing for a while yet.’

He inspected his claws of his right anxiously. ‘And when you say 'a while'...?’

‘I couldn't tell you,’ replied Moominmamma, apologetically. ‘It's always different, or so I've heard. Your mother and I were discussing this just the other day, you know she's considerably more experienced in the field than I am, after all.’

She likely hadn't meant anything by that, Moominmamma wasn't the type to act spiteful, yet it gave Snufkin a heavy pang of guilt. Perhaps his decision had been more obvious than he'd anticipated. ‘Sorry, I've troubled you both over nothing.’

Two sets of paws patted at various parts of body consolingly, and two voices provided their understanding at once, setting his teeth on edge.

‘Snufkin, dearest, I'd rather you told us if you felt anything was wrong,’ Moominmamma said, softly. ‘Though this isn't, I promise you. It will continue to happen, however, I'm sorry to say. Moving around does help, now that I think about it. We're in the middle of a last dance before midnight. Would you like to join us?’

He'd paused before answering, though it hardly needed thinking about. ‘I'll stay here a little longer.’

‘Of course. When you're ready.’ Then she brushed her thumb across his wrist gently and stood.

He thanked her as she walked away, leaving the door ajar behind her.

Moomintroll blew out a heavy sigh and slumped into the cushions. ‘Goodness me, that was a scare.’ He reached over the side of the arm to retrieve the misplaced hat.

Snufkin made his vague noise of agreement as it was gently pulled over his ears; it was the usual response when he didn't have anything more to say.

Back in the main room, everyone shuffled together under the grandfather clock in eager anticipation as its second hand crept ever closer to the hour. Lively murmurs rippled through the small crowd; some of the younger teens spilled over with excitement in their tiredness and clambered about their docile parents, standing huddled beside the moomin pair, who were anxiously scanning over a sea of orange for the missing guests. Sure enough, they spotted Moomintroll and Snufkin leaning in the doorway, waving warmly.

Mymble followed their gaze and acknowledged them with a cheery nod. She pulled on The Joxter's sleeve and pointed in their direction. He'd just opened his mouth to give his greetings when he was interrupted by the countdown starting around him, Little My crowing above all other voices.

The two on the outside joined in quietly at first, nothing more than a gentle whisper, growing louder as the time grew closer, encouraging one another - and when the joyous chanting reached its end, when the clock began its twelve chimes to ring in the new year and the room filled with
January, as far as Snufkin would remember this, was but a footnote in all that had happened. The new year had indeed brought change, and not for the better. The tedium of an endless winter increased as the month dragged on, making him almost miss the lighter snows of December. Moominhouse was often eerily quiet these days, save for the plaintive crackle of the wireless, which only spluttered out grim reminders about the severe weather when it would work. Nobody went, and nobody came. No visitors could break through the harsh blizzards; Mymble and her clan were stranded out in the forest, where the turtle had gone to feed before the storms had set in, leaving the four of them to wait out the worst by themselves. Those who were still awake across the valley stared out of their windows with downcast faces at the snow building steadily higher around them. Even under the shelter of the eaves, it had grown ankle-deep. Snufkin kept to himself - sleeping, when he could, and pacing the perimeter of the room when the little one wouldn't. Perhaps absurdly, as it probably wasn't any inconvenience to them, he found himself muttering his apologies and sympathies during those times. Much as the thought frightened him - just one of the things weighing on his mind as of late - he yearned for them to finally make an appearance so he could at last be done with it; it wouldn't matter what the weather was like, there would be something to hold his attention through it.

Then again, Snufkin thought with a rush of anxiety, they were very ill-prepared should anything actually happen. Naturally, any shop that stocked what they would need was locked tight for the hibernation period, and would be for another two months or so at the very least. He did know of one place, where he'd stopped on the journey to and from the valley on occasion, but that was half a day's walk away, and it was much too treacherous for anyone to be outside for that length of time right now. It was run by a peculiar little fillyjonk who was a discredit to her name, and whom he was fond of for that reason. They'd met during his return from the south on a wet March evening: he'd spent the whole night helping her gather up goods that had been washed away in a spring tide, scanning the fields with his vision and her lantern until the sun rose. She was extremely grateful and promised anything she could do to repay him. At the time, he'd never asked for anything in return, but maybe she would still remember.

During a rare conversation with the others, Snufkin had mentioned paying a visit there once the dreadful blizzard had passed, but the moomins wouldn't hear of it; too far, too cold, too dangerous so late on, they'd all agreed. They would be happy to go on his behalf. Yes, they might have said so out of goodwill, but it was clear from how quickly the offer had been made that they too had jumped at a chance for a change of scenery. He tried not to feel bitter. And who could blame them: Moominpappa and Moominmamma had both grown tired of the novelty of skipping hibernation, realising that there wasn't anything worth seeing if you were stuck indoors, but they daren't step a foot outside the house. Not just for fear of frostbite, but also of the sort who made their home in such conditions, for it was certain that the dreaded Lady of the Cold was behind it, who, unlike a Groke, couldn't be appeased by kindness. They'd never
appreciated the freedom of the springs and summers more, and would pass the time eagerly discussing their warm weather plans.

It was desperately searching the storage room for anything that could alleviate the dull afternoons that Moominpappa happened upon something wonderful; because of the tremendous amount of clutter it held, it was always the first place to be covered up in the hibernation preparations, and they hadn't bothered to pull down any of the dust sheets from the furniture yet. Most of it went untouched through the year, anyway. He'd unveiled spare chairs, moth-eaten blankets, discarded writing, and some sort of strange metal contraption that was neither use nor ornament, but was kept - just like the rest of the objects - at Moominmamma's insistence.

“Never know when you may need it”, she'd told them, wisely. When the family pressed on her on what exactly it was, she admitted she hadn't a clue, “therefore I can't know if we have no need of it”.

But amongst all the fabric and furniture, one piece had caught Moominpappa's eye: he'd lifted a cover near the very back of the room, where he was sure they'd shoved a collection of board games at some point (maybe then they could play something other than cards, he was tired of being humiliated by Moominmamma's prowess every other night) - and there it was. Moominpappa had no idea she'd even kept the old thing - that was the thing about storage rooms; it was very easy to forget what you had accumulated in them - except in this case, he could understand her reason.

‘He'll love that,’ Moominpappa said aloud to himself, proud of his own thoughtfulness. The wicker cracked as he dragged the sheet back over, regretfully musing on how he'd actually never been there to see it occupied. ‘But I shan't tell him now. When he comes around.’

Meanwhile, Moomintroll, who'd become accustomed to long days of boredom from his own winter wakings, was the only one who seemed to be coping well. He took the opportunity to read some old books that had sat gathering dust on the little shelf since his childhood, and once or twice had caught himself wistfully daydreaming about how lovely it will be for them to see some proper use again.

Like with most things, it was he - his kind and considerate Moomintroll - who broke the spell of mundanity for Snufkin, too.

He'd arrived in the bedroom with meals for them both, breaking away from the family dinner to keep him company; roasted celery and mushrooms, prepared after managing to coax out a preference. Moomintroll usually disapproved of anything but soups in beds over a dislike of getting bits in the sheets, but he was willing to make an exception.

‘Why don't you start on your new tune?’ he'd proposed, settling on top of the quilt with him, and when Snufkin had heard that, it felt not unlike finally stopping to light his fires after travelling through the depths of the darkest woods. Well, didn't that all seem so obvious to him now. It was possible that the thought hadn't occurred to him because, really, it was difficult to summon the inspiration that he found in the sounds of spring through the deafening winds, but that didn't mean he couldn't go looking for it. And that's just what he did.

Moomintroll was given a celery-scented kiss on the snout for his efforts, making him scrunch up his eyes happily and push another back.

A short time after, the beginnings of a melancholy song made its way through the cracks of the house, and from the room below, Moominmamma and Moominpappa faced one another and
smiled.

He still didn't speak to anyone often, but that was simply because he had to listen harder; tunes
couldn't just be pulled out of thin air, now, and they couldn't be forced to appear, either. Snufkin
would have to just let it come to him slowly.

The final days of the month seemed to pass by faster now that Snufkin had something to occupy
his thoughts; February soon rolled around and, though he still ached with cold and much else, the
promise of winter's end had lifted his spirits immensely. Even the snow was starting to let
up, almost as if his own music heralded the change in seasons, leaving only frozen mounds dotted
around the yellowed grass.

One blessed morning, when he and the parents had awoken bright and early and gathered together
for breakfast, just beyond the path to Moominhouse, Snufkin could see tiny pinpricks of green
from the drawing room window. He hadn't noticed before, but the rising sun had hit just the right
spot to make them glisten in the melting ice. Snufkin set his bowl of porridge aside and peered
closer out.

‘Snowdrops!’ he'd exclaimed when a sleepy Moomintroll slumped downstairs to join them. Oh, he
could just leap up and down if he were able. ‘Look! They're really there!’

A large, warm paw settled on his shoulder. When Snufkin turned, he was greeted by twinkling blue
eyes so loving that it made his chest tighten. Moomintroll came and nestled beside him, and their
tails met under the window-seat. ‘I've missed you.’

‘It's a good day for a walk,’ said Snufkin a little later, and though Moomintroll wanted to protest,
he had to accept that the worst of it had passed.

There was no good reason to stay indoors any longer. Mamma and Pappa had themselves set out
shortly after breakfast for their shopping errand; they likely wouldn't be back until the evening,
they'd called over their shoulders on the way.

He'd chosen not to go with them, preferring to stay back with Snufkin. They'd left comfortably
bundled up for the weather, and if they were able to brace it, then Snufkin certainly could.

Still, he had his reservations, especially with how often he'd take to lying down with the
pains. ‘Don't go far. Will you be okay on your own?’

Snufkin pulled his paws through the arms of his coat and placed them on his waist. ‘Why, aren't
you coming with me?’

Moomintroll raised his ears happily and dashed over, holding onto him as if he might change his
mind any second. ‘Oh, you are sure? You don't want to be by yourself?’
‘I'm sure,’ said Snufkin. ‘I wanted to make it up to you for being such an awful curmudgeon lately.’

‘Don't be silly, you haven't been,’ Moomintroll replied, sadly. ‘But I'd love to take a walk with you.’ His expression switched as he watched Snufkin crouch to the floor and reach for something by the hat-rack. ‘Surely you're not going out in those?’ he said, gesturing to the boots he was lacing up.

‘What's wrong with them?’

‘Those ludicrously high heels; you'll trip and fall out there and I don't want you getting hurt.’

Snufkin clicked his tongue thoughtfully. ‘I haven't got anything else.’

‘Fine,’ relented Moomintroll. ‘But I shall have to hold your paw the whole time.’

‘I'll cope.’

‘Can you - I mean, I don't suppose you can tell anything about them?’

Snufkin laughed bemusedly. ‘Like what?’

It really was a beautiful morning outside: the sun was beating down and slowly clearing snow from the branches, landing around the early buds peeking through the frost. They were headed in the direction of the shore toward the bathing house where, with any luck, Too-Ticky would still be taking up residence this time of year. Snufkin hadn't run into her for a while now, and figured it'd be nice to pay at least a passing visit while he had the chance. The two got along tremendously well when they did meet, though they'd probably exchanged a total of three conversations in all the time they'd known each other. Both she and Snufkin shared an understanding about the appreciation of silence, along with many other things. It really was a shame that their taste in weather didn't line up.

Until now, they'd been travelling in silence. The rhythmic dripping of the icicles and the distant rushing of a thawing stream signalled spring's impending arrival, just the thing to bring the tune forward, slowly but surely. Snufkin would've taken out his harmonica to test its feel, let it flow through and weave itself into music, but he couldn't play right now. Moomintroll had his fingers firmly threaded through his. Proficient at it as he was, it was rather difficult to play a mouth organ well with just the one paw, so he hummed it instead. Snufkin usually couldn't compose in the company of others, but Moomintroll's presence never bothered him. He had posed the question during a break in the song.

‘Oh, I don't know,’ he went on to say. It did sound more ridiculous out loud. ’You must have some idea.’

‘Only as much as you do, I'm afraid - except,’ Moomintroll's ears pricked at the change in tone. ‘They do have a tail. I'm sure of it. I don't think I’ve told you - right there, you see - and it must be yours, because mine didn't grow until I was quite old.’

‘My tail!’ gasped Moomintroll, his own flitting back and forth in joy. Well, that settled it; it had to
be a little Moominmaiden. He pouted when his dreamy thoughts caught up to the rest. ‘What do you mean, 'old'? You had it when we met. You were thirteen.’

‘Thirteen is old.’

‘Really; what do you call thirty-eight, then?’

‘Death's door.’

Moomintroll made a scandalised snort. ‘Don't say such awful things.’

Snufkin smiled after Moomintroll as he released his grip and hopped down a dip in the path, but it faded when he realised his shorter legs only dangled a bit over the edge, and he couldn't seem to get himself any lower. He tipped his hat over his eyes and took a step back again.

‘I really hate to ask - might you, um, help?’ He limply held out an arm and gestured to the slope.

‘You know, I would, but apparently I'm so ancient and decrepit,’ teased Moomintroll, but he was already reaching for him.

‘There's something else I didn't tell you,’ said Snufkin suddenly as they approached the bathing house.

‘Yes?’

‘I have an idea. For a name. Well - really, it's both our idea,’ he continued, and now Moomintroll was very intrigued. ‘Do you remember when you suggested Lilja, from the book?’ He nodded excitedly. ‘There was something just below it that I think would be perfect for them.’

Snufkin stopped walking and turned his attention to the ocean. Moomintroll waited patiently; he could get like that when he was deep in thought about something, or maybe he was just tired. He did sound a bit winded after their short journey.

‘If they turn out more mumrik than moomin,’ he began at last, stepping up onto the wooden planks, ‘then I'd like to name them Liljekonvalj. They're spring flowers, which is when they'll be born, and where they'll be born is a part of it, too. And this way we'll have named them together. How does that sound?’

Moomintroll tested it in his head for just a moment before agreeing that it was a darling name for her. Even if privately he thought his other choice was looking more likely, the image it brought forward of a tinier Snufkin nestled in the new spring flowers made his heart leap a bit. He pulled his paws closer to him and beamed. ‘What a lovely thing to call them.’

Snufkin tore his stare away from the water to his feet, with a gentle smile to himself. ‘I'm glad you think so.’

‘Those flowers - they bloom in May, don't they?’ Moomintroll asked. ‘What was it your mother said: late March or April? Suppose she's wrong. It would be sweet if they arrived when the flowers did.’

Snufkin's face immediately creased in a frown. ‘I hope not,’ he replied, uneasily. He was firmly set on the earliest she'd given. ‘Incidentally, how long do moomins carry for?’
‘... Thirteen months,’ said Moomintroll, with a rueful wince.

‘Ah.’

There wasn't another sound except for the creak of the landing stage and the waves crashing against the shore, until they came about halfway across it, and Snufkin stated, assuredly: ‘But it couldn't be that long.’

‘I shouldn't think so, no.’

‘No.’

Moomintroll hesitated before reaching for the doorknob. ‘No.’

Chapter End Notes

if you're a Swedish speaker or you've seen my tumblr, then you'll already know: Liljekonvalj is the Swedish name for lily of the valley!

i'm aware of the irony of dismissing january as a footnote and then giving it The most attention in the chapter whoops!
this is the what, second useful thing I've dragged out of the moomin house. I love a hoarding ex machina.
Too-ticky

Chapter Notes

man this isn't related to the chapter or anything but the song 'somewhere nicer' by obi makes me think of this fic ok enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The doorknob clicked in place, and the old wood did nothing but rattle dully against the frame under his weight.

‘It might have jammed in the cold,’ suggested Snufkin, but Moomintroll, now feeling rather silly, realised that he'd been trying to force a locked door.

It was an easy thing to forget. The moomins themselves were not in business of securing their buildings. That addition was Too-ticky's doing.

Pappa was furious when he’d woken and discovered what she'd taken it upon herself to add during their absence. (He'd seen this reaction once before, after his one and only act of adolescent rebellion: installing the lock on his bedroom. Snufkin had been in a real conflict over the whole matter when Moomintroll asked his advice and refused to pick a side.)

He'd softened once they found the note tucked under the lifebuoy, explaining that it was for the safety of the invisible beasts who took refuge there under her guidance. Most were abandoned, others shy, but some were unfortunate enough to still have people looking for them. Moomintroll had never witnessed any of these threats for himself, though it was best to take her word for it.

A more likely reason was to give the younger ones peace of mind. Too-ticky was thoughtful like that. She even had the polite foresight to always leave the door open as she'd found it before departing - and if the bathing house was closed, then that meant she must still be around the valley.

Hoping whoever happened to be in there wasn't cowering for dear life in the cupboards right now, Moomintroll knocked softly a few times, careful to mind any splinters.

There was no answer.

‘Yoo-hoo, Too-ticky!’

He shrank back at his own awkward greeting. It was difficult to introduce yourself to a person you hadn't seen in many years. Wasn't it funny to think they were just a stone's throw away each winter?

Moomintroll called out again: ‘Are you in there?’

Nothing; not even the scurrying of little mice and shrews could be heard when he pressed his ear up against the keyhole. He was just about to turn on his heel dejectedly, when out beyond the landing stage, something caused a great stir in the ice sheets, and an answer travelled along the ocean breeze.

‘Ho! That's no' Moomintroll, is it?’
His ears twitched to the direction of the shout. The voice was stronger, gruffer, yet unmistakably hers.

The pleasantly rounded figure of Too-ticky soon sailed into view on a rickety fishing boat, rod slung over one shoulder and a rusted tin bucket in her paw, clattering its loose handle as she waved. She navigated the glacial waters as tightly as seabird.

Moomintroll could see the difference in her right away. Her hat wasn't blue anymore, it was brown instead, and the red-and-white woollen jumper wasn't the striped one that he always pictured her in - but then, it had been a long time since they’d last met. Snufkin's habit of keeping clothes had him expecting everyone else to remain unchanged. It was very intricate and comfortable-looking, a pattern he recognised from one of Mamma's knitting books.

‘Hallo, wee moomin - well!’ She cackled as he helped her onto shore and pulled himself to full height. ‘Perhaps no.’

Where they’d once stood eye-to-eye, Moomintroll now towered over her. He suddenly felt very old.

‘Goodness, ye've shot up over the years. Haven't seen ye since ye were about here,’ said Too-ticky, touching her head. ‘Back tae waking up again?’

‘Haven't slept a wink all season,’ he replied, almost proudly. ‘Err - except for at night - obviously.’

And indeed she was impressed. ‘Oh, deciding tae brave the elements alone with us winter folk, are we?”

‘Not quite.’

Moomintroll shuffled aside, and Too-ticky registered for the first time who the other person standing beside the bathing-house was. She raised her equipment in delight and bounded over toward Snufkin.

‘You as well!’

Hoisting the rod further up her shoulder, Too-ticky leant in for a shake. ‘Aye, I was surprised tae not catch sight of ye headin' over the mountains. No followin' the birds south this year, then?’

His eyes noticeably glazed over as he racked his brain for what to say, until he was courteously saved the trouble by Too-ticky herself.

‘I get it: difficult business with the wee one, eh?’

Snufkin sheepishly crossed his wrists over his smock and looked to Moomintroll, who appeared thoroughly deflated at losing the opportunity for an announcement.

‘How did you guess?’ he asked, somewhat petulantly.

She merely observed them with a wry smile, then tapped the side of her snout and declared, ‘Nothing gets past ol' Too-ticky.’

Moomintroll supposed she was nowadays. Instead of blonde strands poking from under the knitted cap like untidy straw, her hair was a wild shock of white. It made her steely eyes all the more striking against the pale fur, as if she'd been stared down by the Lady herself and lived - and for all he knew, she very well may have. He thought, which he always did when they encountered each other, how her bare feet didn't catch an awful chill in the snow. Perhaps they did and she simply
never minded.

‘Yer still here in the dead of winter, an’ I’ve never seen ye out of that green dress, so I put two an’
two taegether, eh?’

‘I see,’ Snufkin answered, doubtfully.

Too-ticky fumbled in her trouser pocket and brought out a worn key tangled in twine. ‘In any case,
best get ye all out the cold.’

Freeing it idly, she turned it in the lock and ushered the men inside.

A welcoming flow of warm air rushed over them from the residual heat of the iron stove, where a
saucepan was cooling on top. Too-ticky entered, depositing her rod and bucket against the cabinet.
Loosened dust blew through the hazy glow of the room in the draft.

The guests seated themselves in front of the stove, paws around the smouldering wood; the door
creaked shut behind them, though none of the group had been near it.

‘Sorry about that. I've got no charges righ' now, normally ye could've wandered straight in.’
Kneeling under the table, Too-ticky gathered an armful of sturdy logs and re-kindled the fire. ‘But
I've had tae keep it locked up lately, on account of someone comin' in an' teasin' the shrews.’

Moomintroll tutted disapprovingly. ‘Who would do a thing like that?’

Without looking up, she pointed her thumb in Snufkin's direction midway replacing the key. ‘His
father.’

Snufkin pinched his eyes closed in exasperation. ‘Did you tell him not to?’

‘Aye,’ she said, flatly.

‘There's your problem,’ was his matter-of-fact response. 'And you might want to leave it open.
That ought to dissuade him.'

Too-ticky muttered something about him "wanting to act his age” as she lifted the lid off the pan,
pouring its contents across three bowls that were waiting patiently beside the stove-top.

‘It’s not much in the way of a meal, ye’ll have tae forgive me,’ she said, humbly. Two tepid
servings of what smelt to be a carrot broth were pressed into their open paws. She nudged the
bucket with the end of her foot, and it gave a hollow ding. ‘Weak pickin’s out there today; guess
it’s the gale we’re due for this evenin’.

‘Are we now?’ mused Moomintroll, uneasily. 'Oh, I hope my parents don't find themselves in it ...'

Talk of the weather faded into the background as Snufkin’s attention drifted to the low sunlight
gleaming through the red-and-green window panes. Little claw prints darted over the dappled
reflections on the knobbly boards where the dust had settled.

Setting down the bowl, he laced his fingers together under his chin and watched, charmed, as the
fabric around his lap dinted with an unseen weight. Snufkin had gone to lower a friendly paw, but
the creatures scurried away again the second he moved. Several streaks disappeared into the
space under the table. He supposed his face must have scared them off.
'What about yerself, Snufkin?' Too-ticky's question shook him out of his daydreaming. She was perched opposite them on a weather-beaten deck chair. 'Turn up anything today?'

He pensively tapped his spoon against the rim. 'I haven’t fished since autumn,’ he sighed, longingly. 'I’ve been detained.’

'You have not,' interrupted Moomintroll.

'Confined, restrained,’ he continued, dolefully, not taking his eyes off Too-ticky. Moomintroll bumped his shoulder fondly. 'But it hardly matters. I don't like to disturb anything without the intention of at least one keep, anyway.’

He and Too-ticky had crossed paths enough times while he'd been out fishing for it to raise suspicion, which was probably why that pitying grin crossed her face. 'Don’t tell me – yer put off. That’d be just typical, wouldn’t it?'

'Far from it,’ he snorted. Snufkin stared into the centre of the stove. My, what he'd give to be frying a fresh catch across a fire like that. He tried to quell the urge with another sip of soup. 'I’ve been told to stay away.’

'By whom?’

'My mother.’

And to that, Too-ticky hummed in a way uncannily similar to Snufkin, enough for Moomintroll to take a second glance in doubt of his own ears. His eyes flitted between the two, with their tangled hair, large, soulful eyes, and short stature, wondering how he'd never noticed the resemblance before.

She grabbed the rod from where it was propped up against the yellow panels and offered it to Snufkin, who took it in slight confusion. ‘Have that, I'll make another fer later.’

'You don’t mind me borrowin’ Snufkin after this, do ye?’ she asked of Moomintroll, motioning toward him.

He frowned warily. If Moomintroll were to be honest with himself, then yes, he did. He already didn’t like that they had the walk back home in a potential storm to come yet, and whatever this plan was clearly involved being outside.

But he shook his head all the same; Too-ticky wasn't foolish, and knowing her, she’d have her reasons behind it.

Her lips stayed thin, but a lift in the creases around her eyes hinted at a smile when she addressed Snufkin again, surveying them both somewhat agitatedly. 'Yer not gonnae like this.'

They’d ventured out as a pair. Moomintroll was away chopping up more firewood at Too-ticky’s request. A person as well prepared as her was unlikely to be "caught short", as she'd stated. Snufkin was sceptical of her intentions, and waited until he was surely out of earshot before asking what the cache piled around the side of the landing stage was for, then.
"Well. It'll keep him warm. An' busy." Too-ticky shook the frost from a fallen branch, inspecting it closely. "Ye don't want him fussin' around all afternoon, do ye? Watch yer footin' there." She couldn't keep the amusement from showing this time. "Jus' kidding."

He had to agree; it had taken a fair amount of reassurances from her before they were even able to leave the hut.

Now, it was really a matter of finding the right spot: being so exposed at sea was out of the question, and there’d been no luck there for Too-ticky all morning, regardless; the main rivers and streams – though just beginning to thaw – were unlikely to turn up anything decent as the winds strengthened; and the smaller ponds held very little this time of year. No, they needed somewhere secluded and suitably well-stocked for a successful trip.

Just as well that Snufkin had come to know the valley better than most of its permanent residents. There was, as it happened, such a place, where the river that meandered through the meadows trailed away under the shelter of steep, jagged rocks that jutted from the ground and loomed around the pool, like it was held in some great creature's paw. Easy to miss if you weren't looking for it, and it wasn’t so far from the bathing-house that they couldn't rush back if the weather turned.

A sullen Snufkin was hunched over the edge in an oversized blue bathrobe, flask of soup at his feet, indulging in a moment of self-pity. He’d almost gone without the former, but Moomintroll had stood his ground against his own stubbornness on this one – until he conceded that it was, in fact, quite brisk out here. And the lingering smell from its use in the summer might’ve helped.

It was distractingly claustrophobic on top of an already thick coat, and his efforts to find some comfort by fidgeting against the layers only succeeded in waking the little one, fidgeting in turn. At least they were always a reliable sympathiser. It wasn't enough to wipe the pout from his face, however.

Snufkin removed his paw from under his overclothes and gripped the rod in the small mittens he wore over them.

“So's I can keep track of lost folk”, according to Too-ticky when she'd presented him with them. Another one of Moomintroll's ideas. “But don't worry about giving 'em back, I can knit more”.

‘There, there,’ she was telling him now, rather unhelpfully. ‘Don't sulk so.’

‘It's been months,’ he said miserably. His mood wasn't improved when he cast out the line and immediately snagged it between two large stones. ‘Look at that; I've gotten rusty.’

Too-ticky dutifully waded in to free it. Snufkin cringed at the ice water flowing around her ankles. Did all beasts of winter have immunity to the harshness of the season, or was it just her, he wondered. Paddling back with the spirited sigh of someone returning from a refreshing dip, she settled herself a short way from him and began tying her own around the branch she’d taken.

‘It'll come to ye. Anyway, she wasn't wrong, a lot of fish is bad.’ She paused to thread the cork through. ‘I'm sure she meant well. That's mothers an' their myths for ye. But I've been told of a person who swore by a herring once a week for a strong child, and they'd six of them already, so they knew what they were talkin' about.’

‘And how are you so knowledgeable?’ grumbled Snufkin, gearing up for a second try. It landed perfectly. He supposed it was a bit of an overreaction.
‘Mymble,’ replied Too-ticky. The admiration poured into a single word reminded him of how he’d speak of Moomintroll. ‘I’m sure ye know she’s had tae play midwife now an’ again. Learnt a fair amount off her own back so she’d please yer mother. ... More canny than her, too, if ye don’t mind my sayin’.’

He didn’t. Mother appeared as though she had complete control on the surface; underneath, she was terribly scatter-brained at times.

Poor Mymble, thought Snufkin; eldest in the family, and therefore assigned as most responsible.

From the stories his father would tell, she’d rivalled Little My in temperament when they’d arrived on the island. Then My herself came along, and all attention (as much as Mother ever gave to the lot) fell to her, leaving Mymble in charge of the middle children. He hadn’t realised that her care extended that far, but he couldn’t say he was surprised. That explained the annotations in the book. Palm across his brow, he tried not to consider the possibility that he might’ve avoided a gruelling wait if he’d only read on.

Snufkin started to wonder then whether he could have been one of the children she’d tended to - which, oddly enough, is where Too-ticky's mind had also wandered.

‘Let me handle any bigguns.’ A second float skimmed the water beside his. ‘I might be knowledgeable, but I’m not my wife. I can’t help if ye overdo it and get things goin’.’

‘Are you often complimented on your bedside manner, Too-ticky?’

Snufkin saw her mouth twitch at the corners as she reached over him for the bucket. His thoughts centred firmly on “wife”, but he didn’t dare pry. He imagined they lived under the same arrangement; not bound by formalities, but together too long to call it much else.

‘Where is she now?’ Snufkin asked, conversationally. He was acting unfairly rotten to someone so amiable to be around.

‘Far, far away from yer siblings,’ Too-ticky answered blithely, scattering a pawful of bait down the drop. ‘A letter came through not long ago, actually. Last I heard, it was a village further East. But she talked about the locals prepping a New Year’s bonfire, so I’ve no idea where she’s moved on tae. You know how the post is in winter.’

Snufkin nodded along, though he didn’t really. ‘How are you getting letters?’

There was a mischievous glint in her eye. ‘Through the moomins’ postbox. Don’t go tellin’.

He made a grunt of agreement, then, taking a swig from the flask, stared over the dark water and thought more about his sister; about how, once the last bunch of children had become old enough to look after themselves, and it was certain there wouldn’t be any more to follow, Mymble had high-tailed it away from the valley for some long awaited peace and quiet.

It had been a surprise to everyone but those who’d heard the grand tales of the Oshun Oxtra days, where she’d proven herself as the adventuresome type. She wasn’t away as frequently as himself, but her visits home were definitely growing further apart. Maybe one day she’d up and leave and never return.

‘I do worry for her on these trips,’ admitted Too-ticky. ‘Mymble's got a rational enough head on her shoulders - aye, anyone capable of keepin’ two dozen toddlers safe an' accounted for at a time would have tae- but she's got a romanticised view of the world as a consequence of being kept away from it. Sensible people don’t go around associating with pirates.’
As the sun began to fade under the horizon again, and the bucket now held the blessed sight of two plump arctic grayling (both plucked out by Snufkin, who looked very pleased with himself), the conversation of Mymble’s travels continued on from where they’d left off. There were few people Snufkin knew whose company felt effortless to be in, who understood when to talk and when not to, and could hold a passing thought over hours, days, even months until it was needed again.

‘Got the shock of her life when she arrived, apparently.’ Too-ticky dug her toes into the soil and snow as though anchoring herself in for the story. ‘She tells me she'd gone by train, an' had jus' stepped out of the station when she spied one of those bookmobiles waitin' by the entrance. Well, it's been a long journey, nothin' much tae see but the white trees an' hills. So she says. Ye know she doesnae take tae the winter as I do. We really are star-crossed, me an' her.

‘Anyway, so a long journey, aye? A readin' break doesnae sound half bad. So she strolls on up, knocks on the windae - an' a wee red-haired fella wi' bright blue eyes pops out of it, an' he says to her, 'hello, dear Mymble! I haven't seen you in years.'

She snorted behind her paw. ‘Can ye imagine the look on her sweet face: she thought she'd gotten away from the house, only tae run smack into a sibling, bless her.’

Snufkin raised his eyebrows in fearful solidarity. It was a concern he'd considered before on his journeys. One could never feel too confident with so many displaced children across the world that a stray mymble wasn't lurking about somewhere - and though it hadn't happened yet, he decided not to pursue the thought any further, for fear of tempting fate. 'I'm surprised My didn't try to leave with her.'

‘She did; Mymble found her stowed away in her bag just before she left.’

They shared a smirk at the thought. Snufkin may not have been there, but he'd witnessed enough scenes like it to build an image: Mymble’s aghast face at being ambushed, the scolding that would follow, Little My shrieking with laughter all the while.

‘Anyway, he was no relation,’ Too-ticky went on to say. ‘But wouldn't ye know, the reason he recognised her is 'cause they'd known each other quite well, once. They'd met when he was jus' a boy.’

It was this last piece in the collection of detail that dislodged a sombre memory of another late stay in the valley.

‘... Toft?’

Too-ticky punctuated her astonished nod with a click of her fingers. 'Ye know him?'

‘I do!’ Snufkin was sitting alert now; his tail quivered behind him, fishing rod quite forgotten. ‘The moomins took him in. For a few years. He moved away not so long after the snorks began talk of their plans to see the world. It seems he envied their easy independence and felt it was time he
struck out on his own.’

Toft’s eventual acceptance into the family was, for Snufkin, foggy at best. Nothing much was changed by it, that he was certain of. He’d been welcomed with open arms as any other foundling had - sniffs, snorks, snufkins, the lot of them. Admittedly, the circumstances of Toft’s arrival weren’t worth thinking about, so the memory must have worn away unaware to him. It did good to only focus on the after.

‘He wrote for a while, and then they fell out of contact. One forgot to reply. I’m not sure who.’

Either way, Snufkin imagined that dear little Toft probably felt too shy to try again. Perhaps he feels he’s left it too long, or that they had good reason for not writing, depending on whose end it was. He was very sensitive.

Too-ticky exhaled in disbelief. ‘Isn’t it a small world, eh.’

She suddenly lifted her line back in and stood. Snufkin did the same, if a bit reluctantly. He supposed Moomintroll would be due back by now.

‘Well, Mymble talked him intae exchanging addresses so they could keep in touch - ’course, he doesnae really have one, lives out of that transport, y’see - so she's gonnae send any letters off tae the post office closest the station. Apparently, he's down that way a lot. Maybe ye can tell the moomins.’

Snufkin said he would pass the message along.

Chapter End Notes

pretty sure toft's uh. blonde. but he's red in the anime, so for the purposes of this chapter to work he is here, too.

OOPS I haven't updated in weeks.
I've got kind of a Block going on here real bad, so I just decided to split this chapter since it was getting over the average length for these, anyway.

now we're ending at 10 instead of 9!
wish me luck on working out the next two!

too-ticky: keep the mittens you might need em. consider it a present from an aunt, eh?
snufkin: (maths meme) are we related
snufkin: oh god that means I'm related to sniff

(that's not the kind of canny she meant snufkin oho)
Once Moomintroll had returned with the firewood, and the catch roasted and eaten over it, he and Snufkin waved their appreciative goodbyes to Too-ticky and ambled off to Moominhouse.

Along the way, they’d made a sudden detour under the pine branches, where Snufkin had practically showered himself in their needles to cover up any trace of the tell-tale scent; that dreaded turtle was stamping around mere yards away, and he was not about to land himself in a lecture should someone take a peek outside.

It was done as nothing more than a precaution, certain that no one would have spotted them passing by in the dark, anyway - that is, until:

“Where have you been gallivanting off to, then?”

The Joxter’s sardonic voice rang clear through a crack in the downstairs window.

He was draped across the bench, illuminated in candlelight and peering forlornly through the fogged glass, a pose so melodramatic that it would have been the envy of any tragic artist searching for their next muse.

Snufkin kept their detail of the trip to the bathing-house brief, having no intentions of stopping, especially if they wanted to beat the advancing gale.

And they wouldn’t have done, had someone’s heavy footsteps not hurried into the room shortly after.

The Mymble’s face filled the middle pane, throwing open the window and squeezing her son’s disgruntled one under her slender fingers, despite the muffled insistence that he never felt the cold on it.

She demanded they come inside at once, clicking her tongue in motherly scorn at the biting draft that followed Snufkin when he did eventually slump through the doorway, and only because Moomintroll had recommended taking five minute’s rest to catch his breath.

Snufkin hung his coat upon the hook, listening to the beams creak as the turtle resumed its pace. It had likely been following the same path. That wasn't much of a surprise, he'd been anticipating an impending visit for the past while. Moomintroll had mentioned overhearing their mothers on the phone.

Apparently, she'd taken against straying too far after finding out about his brief absence at the New Year’s party, anchoring her house nearby the Moomin residence to be fetched at a moment’s notice. He’d spot the smoke rising from its chimney across the treetops most days, a constant reminder of the inevitable.

Perhaps his mother had noticed Moomintroll’s parents leaving that morning and didn’t like the idea of them being left unattended. It was the sort of thing she’d do. Naturally, the two had expected to ride up to the house together and wait for their return.

What they hadn’t expected was to immediately come face to face with them, sitting comfortably
with half-drunk cups of tea in the corner of The Mymble’s drawing room.

‘Hello, dears,’ said Moominmamma casually. Moominpappa gave a polite nod in greeting. ‘Pop in for a visit?’

Snufkin stared ahead, dumbfounded. His eyes drifted down to the box at their feet; they’d already made it to the shop and back.

All a entirely nonplussed Moomintroll could do was squeak out the word: ‘How … ?’

Judging by the parents' bemusement, they obviously found their reaction just as strange.

‘Oh, dear. I thought I’d mentioned that Mymble would be taking us,’ confessed Mamma, holding her snout with an uncertain smile. ‘I suppose I’d forgotten. Silly me.’

‘You didn’t really think we’d walked it, did you?’ Pappa guffawed. He sat up and crossed his legs with an air of pride. ‘I’m flattered you think so highly of this old moomin. My, no! I may be intrepid, but that's quite the trek to return by the evening, wouldn't you say?’

Admittedly, Snufkin had found it a bit funny, though he assumed they might've simply misheard. Travelling with his mother hadn't even occurred to him, especially she'd been so insistent on keeping an eye on him. Goodness, he hoped that didn't mean they thought Moomintroll capable of handling anything by himself. Thank the stars and heavens they hadn't known Mymble was away or he would've found himself bedridden and watched like a hawk all afternoon.

‘We made excellent time, too,’ observed the lady herself, pointing out the pendulum clock hanging beside the silk curtains. It was only just approaching five. ‘It might be half a day through the valley on foot, but it's just a few hours as the turtle swims.’

‘It would’ve been faster, I'd say,’ piped up a voice from behind them; a short mumrik girl in a red dress stood in the kitchen archway, coated head to toe in flour, ‘but Mamma got us lost. Both ways.’

‘Oh, no such thing if you get there,’ she said airily. Then she clasped her great paws together and shook them. ‘Off you go, madam, or you’ll burn the bread.’

But the girl wasn’t listening. Her attention was solely on her brother, who seemed to shrink under her intensely curious stare - or wished that he could.

It didn’t take more than a threatening reach toward the flower vase from Mymble to send the child scampering away again with a thrilled shriek.

Snufkin caught Moomintroll’s eye with a grave expression, who flattened his ears against his head. He supposed it was inevitable that one of them would catch on sooner or later, with a mother like theirs around. And if one had, then the rest would surely follow.

Now he wanted nothing more than to turn tail back to Moominhouse and curl up in peace, but no sooner had he tipped his hat and made for the door (ignoring the others' spluttered pleas), than Snufkin was struck by a thoroughly unpleasant view from the front door window.

Moominhouse seemed to have gotten a lot smaller.

‘Would you look at that,’ The Joxtor commented, looking at the landscape drifting by. ‘Sorry, Snufkin, but I'm afraid our friend might be off to wait out the weather somewhere safe.’
It quickly transpired that those five minutes were going to turn into more than a fleeting visit.

Snufkin couldn’t see where it was that they were headed, only that escape was growing ever further away, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Or was there? He deliberated over this, and ultimately decided that - distance or not – he wasn’t going to spend a second longer trapped in yet another house. His paw had barely reached the handle when he felt his mother grasp his shoulders and spin him right back ‘round to face her.

‘You aren’t taking another step out there – and don’t argue with me,’ she warned as he opened his mouth. ‘It’s much too far, now. I dread to think how long you were outside in that to begin with.’

Snufkin shifted guiltily, avoiding her face. He hadn’t ever seen his carefree mother so incensed by anything. ‘Not long. It came about quick,’ he mumbled, which was only a half-lie.

‘Please, it isn’t Snufkin’s fault,’ insisted Moomintroll, stepping between them.

The Mymble’s authoritative manner lifted as she looked over his weary form, feeling more pity than anything. Her Snufkin wasn’t a reckless boy, just naïve to his present limits. She’d forgotten what it was like for it to be new.

‘You look absolutely dead on your feet, dearest.’

‘Thank you.’

With the atmosphere lightened, the family felt enough at ease to smile at his dryness.

‘Why don’t I run you a nice bath? I can’t imagine you’ve had chance, with the ice and such,’ she offered, not least because, having gotten closer, it was obvious that Snufkin had done his his usual trick of attempting to mask the … distinctive odour he often accumulated, as opposed to washing it away. Her son had a seemingly hereditary habit of only bathing when he deemed it essential, which didn't always line up with everyone else's opinion of when that was.

‘I’ve hardly had chance to get dirty, either,’ he complained, but up he went nonetheless. Unnecessary as it seemed to him, any excuse for solitude was preferable to dealing with an overly crowded home.

Baths were restrictive places; smooth and slippery to the touch, and nowhere to stretch your limbs. Snufkin could probably count the times he’d used them on one paw, if that. They were nothing compared to washing in the gentle current of a stream, drifting like the lily pads and turning river stones under your feet.

And it was hardly a match for the encompassing heat of a spring. He hadn’t been allowed to add more than half a kettle’s worth of hot to it, only enough to offset the freezing water from the holding tank. But at least his hips didn’t ache anymore.

For a while, Snufkin did nothing but lie against the end of the tub and savour the lifted weight. He
kept his eyes firmly locked on the door, even if it was unlikely that any unwanted guests would be poking their heads around it today.

Mymble’s instructions to the brood from the hallway were quite clear: Snufkin was unwell and would be recuperating upstairs, and under no circumstances was anyone to pester him while he did so.

He’d pushed the laundry basket in front of the door for good measure.

It was thoughtful, but ultimately pointless. There wasn’t any peace to be had regardless of where one went in the house; even now, some were tussling in the room overhead, pounding across the ceiling. The toiletries threatened to fall in the cabinet. He knew they meant no real harm, though it didn’t stop him from cursing them as noisy grokelings while attempting to soothe his equally pounding head.

‘Would you be so rowdy?’ Snufkin wondered aloud, and answered himself with: ‘I wouldn’t have thought so.’

Perhaps a little prematurely, it seemed. His arms folded across his middle and soothed there too. ‘Prove me wrong, why don’t you.’

Snufkin lowered back into the lukewarm water and watched the light fixture sway above him. Tufts of red hair flared out in the corner of his eye. It almost grazed his shoulders now. He didn’t like that. Maybe he’d take care of it once he was done.

‘I bet you’re having a little boy,’ divulged Mymble as she handed him the scissors, dabbing her face on the back of her paw. She’s misty-eyed at just the notion of anything to do with her grandchild. Or just about anything.

Snufkin took them and tilted away from the mirror, watching his reflection snip away great chunks of hair at the neck.

‘Why’s that?’ he asked through it.

It’s difficult to see past the array of perfumes and polishes strewn across the turquoise vanity. There are crudely inscribed words on some of the drawers amongst restless claw marks. Most are names.

His mother’s bedroom is warm - modest, yet somehow imposing. In all his visits to her home, he doesn’t think he’s ever seen it. Every inch of the small space is crammed with knick-knacks and furniture, the canopied bed pushed underneath the window much too large for it.

His father, who was lounging on top of it, said nothing. It doesn’t sound to Snufkin as if she’s trying to let anything slip, though. He mustn’t have shared his predictions.

‘Hair always grows longer with boys, they say.’ is the answer he gets. Mymble doesn’t elaborate on who “they” are. ‘And it hasn’t failed me yet. I had such beautiful hair the year you were born.’
Snufkin doesn’t know how truthful that is, but he didn’t question it. The trimmings quickly piled in his lap.

‘Yes, beautiful,’ she sighed, touching the tip of her neat bun while she reminisced. ‘I wore it down a lot simply to show it off. Must have been everything you should have gotten, poor thing; you arrived bald as a coot.’

He smiled gently at himself. Hard to imagine through all the fluff and fuzz he’d grown since, though at the moment that could be blamed on his winter fur. Where he rubbed at his arm in the bath, some of it was already coming loose. Snufkin remembered he hadn’t checked for clogs when the water was let out. The only thing on his mind was how spring was closing in awfully fast.

Meanwhile, The Mymble, now firmly lost in her memories, had started chattering on about other births she’d experienced - completely unaware of Snufkin’s quiet distress beside her as she did so, who was wondering if it might be possible to cut one’s hair while pulling a hat over one’s ears at the same time.

She went on about the shock of her first when she’d been just a young lady herself, her biggest litter of twelve of the tiniest mymbles you could ever imagine (Snufkin made an alarmed gag, which was ignored), wrangling six identical whomperlings on only her third time around, and the excitement surrounding Teasel, her only child to be born in caul.

Snufkin’s lack of reaction obviously hadn’t been what she’d expected (though a large part of it was willing the subject to change); Mymble’s blunt explanation had him putting down the scissors to recover.

The term was familiar through tales of superstition he’d heard, but the knowledge of exactly what it was left him a touch faint.

‘In fact, I bought that very dressing table with what I sold it for,’ she said, tapping on the bright wood. ‘Nice woman - a sailor. Pity she didn’t stick around longer.’

Snufkin squinted at it.

The Joxter, taking interest in the conversation, lifted up his hat and idly announced that he’d been born in caul.

‘Well! You’ve never mentioned that,’ said Mymble, oddly intrigued.

‘Haven’t I?’

Indeed, he was very reticent about discussing his early years, although when it came to his mother, Snufkin knew that most things would go in one ear and out the other. Even so, he couldn’t say that he’d heard it before, either.

‘I’ve certainly mentioned it to Moomin. It annoyed him to no end.’ He let the hat droop over his eyes again, the brim barely covering a brazen smirk. ‘It took the shine out of his special stars.’

Snufkin realised then that it must have been omitted from his memoirs.

‘The others were glad of me on the ship, though,’ boasted Joxter. ‘Hodgkins always reckoned that’s why she never drowned.’

‘Mm. It would have to have been a miracle,’ remarked his mother.
His father tutted in mock-offence; Snufkin distractedly lopped off a larger lock than intended, but he didn’t mind.

Suddenly, Mymble paused and lifted a finger to the air. ‘Do you smell that? I think the baking’s just about done. I’ll lend them a paw and – oh, don’t get up, now.’

The Joxter was already moving from his place on the bed, like the dead risen. ‘That’s all right, my love – I’ll head down.’

‘How very generous of you, dear,’ she gushed, knowing how to goad him. ‘But there’s really no need. I’m sure Gabe has it covered by himself.’

‘No-o, no, no. Not a bother,’ he implored, ruffling up Snufkin’s cropped hair as he passed.

The Mymble watched her husband’s crinkled tail slink around the corner until he was truly out of earshot. ‘Incredible.’

Sighing, she crouched behind Snufkin to meet his level, and rested her arms over the back of his chair.

‘Now – is there something on your mind?’

He tensed. Snufkin clicked the scissors a few times and focused on the table. The drawer he pulled gave a grating squeak, and the scissors went back inside. He continued to flex his fingers, unsure what to make of himself.

His mother was still looking at him when he returned to the mirror, so he shook his head.

‘Are you sure? You looked rather peaky just now.’ Mymble brought her paws from the chair to his shoulders. Snufkin didn’t relax into it, but he didn’t pull away, either. ‘Are you thinking of when it happens?’

She was right, but Snufkin couldn't muster the nerve to say as much. The lights in the room were low. He stared deeper still into the mirror until corners of it darkened. If he imagined that no one was there, if they were someone else’s words, someone who didn’t ask so much of others, perhaps he could be more honest.

‘Yes,’ the reflection said.

‘It’s perfectly natural, you know. To be frightened. I’d be surprised if you weren’t.’

‘I’m not frightened,’ he lied.

‘But?’

Snufkin shoved his paws in the pockets of his smock to settle them. One of seams ripped under his grip. Now he’d gone and spoilt Moomintroll’s hard work. It was silly to feel his throat tighten over such a small thing, so instead he swallowed it down and spoke.

‘I know that Mymble was present a lot, for you. But before her ... did you handle it alone?’

He blinked and let the room come back to him. The elder Mymble stood over him with an inscrutable expression on her face. It wasn’t overtly disapproving, though it didn’t fill him with much confidence.
‘You mean, without their fathers?’ she asked tentatively.

He didn’t. There was something in his mother’s tone that suggested she didn’t, either. But here was another problem to mull over.

Snufkin had absolutely no idea of how Moomintroll might act in the moment. He'd want to be present, certainly. To both coddle him and fuss over their new child the moment they arrived. And that was where the trouble lay. Moomintroll was prone to dramatics, especially in situations that involved him, and they’d more than likely achieve nothing but working each other up into a frenzy together.

And yet, Moomintroll had proved himself to be remarkably grounded on occasion, too. Hadn’t he reacted so perfectly when he was first told of it? There’d been no hysteria then. In fact, he’d been the calmer of the two over the whole thing since the beginning. Perhaps, Snufkin thought to himself, then it wouldn’t be all bad.

Still, it wasn’t something he was sure he wanted: everyone crowding around in the room, in his space, spouting their well-meaning words, demanding his attention and reassurance and whatever else would be needed; the inherent discomfort of people handling him for hours on end, the humiliation of it all happening in front of them. He would have to tell someone before it became too late.

‘I mean without anyone.’

At first, the Mymble said nothing. She slowly drummed her fingers across his shoulder, down to the side of the chair. Her face in the mirror was twisted in careful thought. She was never usually at such a loss for words. Snufkin didn’t know if that was good or bad.

Then she sat herself on the edge of the bed and gestured for him to join her. Snufkin perched beside his mother on the plush quilt, tracing lines in the velvet as he waited for her to speak.

‘I don't wish to scare you, Snufkin,’ she began at last, which already had him feeling terribly apprehensive. ‘But it would be far wiser not to try this alone.’

He nodded passively, trying not to let the wave of disappointment push through.

'That probably wasn't what you wanted to hear, was it?' said Mymble gently. 'Now, don't fret, dearest. Tell you what: when the time does come - and believe me, you'll know - it'll be a long while before anything important happens. You can rest up by yourself, if you need to, but as soon as something feels different, you must let one of us know, so we can make sure that you and the little one are safe and well. Does that sound all right?'

He nodded again, if only because he thought he ought to. To Snufkin, it all sounded, quite frankly, plain terrifying, no matter how it would be dealt with.

Chapter End Notes

first of all, sorry for the long update wait!! I've had a wild block on getting the end of this story into words. thanks for sticking with it, really appreciate you!

secondly, this final stretch ended up quite lengthy, so yes there's an extra "chapter"
added to the count now haha apologies for messing with it constantly. this is what I get for not planning anything in advance. (it's really just a continuation of this chapter. but it needs polishing. so you don't get it yet!)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!